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Roaring Ralph Rockwood, THE RECKLESS RANGER.

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AUTHOR OF "HUNTER HERCULES," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE PRAIRIE PESTS.

THE sharp, whip-like crack of a rifle awoke a thousand echoes among the distant foot-hills, and broke the stilly silence of the night. Following the shot came the shrill neigh of a horse and then once more stillness.

A person with remarkably keen ears might have caught the low but hearty curse, that lost none of its venom by being uttered almost below the breath.

The stars shone in the blue dome of heaven, but it was an impossibility to see with accuracy for any distance.

"Struck home that time, sure! Now, what's next on the programme? If they make a general rush I'll have to risk a bold dash or else stay where I am until the vultures pick my eyes out. Wait and see. In the meantime, I might as well charge up old Sure-Shot."

The man who had fired this shot, lay upon the prairie, while his horse stood not five feet away, restlessly pawing the ground as if in anger. Even as the solitary marksman finished charging his rifle a voice broke the silence that had fallen upon the prairie.

"Ralph Rockwood, surrender! You are surrounded. Resistance is useless and will only result in harm to yourself."

The man at bay laughed hoarsely.

"So you are there, my game chicken? You crow too loud for such a bantling; you need your spurs cut. Well, to speak seriously, what are your terms, in case I give in?" called out the lone man.

"An unconditional surrender. I have you well encircled, and were there ten of you instead of one, your fate would be sealed," came in reply.

"I can well understand what the penalty would be, for you would never let Roaring Ralph get away, after that tussle I gave you in the mountains, and holding the secret that I do," said the recumbent man, in a tone of derision, that spoke volumes for his recklessness and daring, when the fact is taken into consideration that the trampling of hoofs all around him testified to the truth of the Unknown's words.

"Come, your answer, scout?" demanded the unseen leader of his foe.

Roaring Ralph deliberately leveled his rifle in the direction of the voice.

"You have it!" said he, pulling the trigger.

Again that sharp report. This time, however, it was instantly followed by a scream, so full of mingled anguish and despair, that even the daring marksman himself shuddered.

"Let daylight through something, and I'd feel satisfied if I could think 'twas that handsome devil. Now for a regular old fandango."

Like a flash the ranger had bounded to his feet and reached the side of his faithful horse. A furious voice shouted out the word "charge!" and, even as Roaring Ralph, with his rifle slung on his back, and a revolver in his hand, gained the saddle, he heard the thunder of hoofs approaching from all directions.

There was little choice in the selection of a route, so the ranger urged his horse directly forward. Another instant and he was closing in upon his enemies. Several guns and pistols cracked, and the balls whistled rather unpleasantly close to his ears. One, more affectionate, ripped open the sleeve of his coat, in passing, and drew blood.

Crack! went Ralph's revolver. He was a dead shot even under such circumstances, and a saddle was emptied immediately. With a loud cry, the two riders nearest him attempted to seize his horse by the bridle as he passed. One of these fellows he sent to join the man upon the ground, and the other, as if realizing his danger, threw himself behind his horse after the manner of a Comanche Indian, thus escaping the fate that had overtaken his comrades.

Uttering a cry that his horse well understood, the ranger turned in the saddle as the animal darted forward like a racer, and sent back a taunting shout of defiance. He could hear sharp commands given in the voice that had addressed him. Then came the thunder of hoofs upon the prairie. They were in pursuit.

Roaring Ralph laughed softly to himself.

"They'll have fleet steeds that follow, said young Lochinvar, and you have not your equal on the prairie, my bonny Prince Charlie. Come on, you hounds; I'm Roaring Ralph, the rough ranger of the Colorado, and I can eat up more of you Prairie Pests than any other

man outside of creation! That's me, Ralph Rockwood, you bet!"

The level land was wrapped in impenetrable darkness. In the Eastern horizon, a faint, silvery gleam that shot athwart the sky, heralded the coming moon. As the mistress of the night wheeled above the level outline, Roaring Ralph looked behind and found that his fleet steed had distanced every pursuer. He was again alone upon the prairie.

"Well done, Charlie, old boy! Take a halt here and a breathing-spell. That was a sharp tug, and a close shave. Now, if I could only meet Blue Bob, all— Well, I'll be hanged!" this last as an exclamation, for a lank, human form had arisen from the prairie-grass under the very hoofs of his horse, and stood with folded arms before him.

CHAPTER II.

A TRAITOR IN THE CAMP.

"HARK! what was that?"

A train consisting of seven wagons was encamped for the night upon the open prairie.

Before them, as far as the eye could reach, was the same level tract of land, monotonous in its similarity to the many weary miles they had passed over.

The scene was illuminated by the full moon, and very picturesque the white-covered wagons looked, as, drawn up in a circle, they formed a rough fortress for the travelers.

Three men stood just without the inclosure, one of whom had called the attention of his companions to some foreign sound that had caught his ear. The usual night-chorus was in full blast, but above the dismal howling of wolves and chirping of insects, there arose a low, tremulous whistle, that was repeated at intervals of a few seconds.

"That's the queerest sound I've heard this many a day. Whether from bird, beast or reptile, I'll find out in a short time," said the man who had first heard the noise, and who was a fine-looking young fellow of some twenty-eight summers.

The dark face belonging to the man in buckskin actually turned pale, or else it was a strange freak of the moonlight.

"No use hunting, Major Handy; I've seen 'em afore now. A queer little thing like a tree frog. They hush up when you come near."

"Nevertheless, my curiosity is excited, Arkansaw, and I'd rather do without my supper than not gratify it," saying which the young soldier walked away, without vouchsafing the guide another look.

"Curse the meddling fool," muttered Arkansaw, when his other companion had entered among the wagons and left him alone; "what if he should set eyes on Eph or Dave? What in the devil do they mean by signaling so early? I told them about midnight. 'Twould serve 'em right if the major put a bullet through one of their carcasses."

Arkansaw then stood in a listening attitude, as if half expecting to hear something. Nor was he long kept in suspense.

Hardly had five minutes passed since Major Handy had announced his determination to see from what source that wavering, melodious trill came, before his voice was heard, out on the prairie, raised as if addressing some one. The crack of a pistol followed, and hardly had this died away before there floated to the ears of the guide a taunting laugh.

"Arizona Dave, for all the world, and the major missed his mark!" muttered Arkansaw, smiling grimly, as if in satisfaction.

The quick hoof-strokes of an animal on the full gallop now reached him, that gradually became less distinct, as if the horseman was leaving the camp behind him. A form loomed up in the moonlight, and entered among the wagons. It was Major Handy. Several men met him, and inquired what he had seen.

"There's mischief brewing somewhere, boys. We must keep our eyes open. I was moving through the prairie grass when a man sprung up beyond and started to run. You heard me

call out for him to halt or I'd shoot, but he didn't pay the least attention to my order, so I let fly. He tumbled over like a flash, and I thought I'd dropped him. I was just about to run forward to see how badly he was hurt, when a laugh drew my attention to another quarter, and there the sharp scoundrel was, riding away at full speed. He crawled through the long grass for about twenty feet to where his horse lay concealed. I rather guess the moonlight gave me a bad aim, for you know I'm not in the habit of missing."

"But, what in 'tarnal thunder was he a-doin', major?" asked a teamster.

"That would be hard to say. My opinion is this: there's a gang of cutthroats in this neighborhood called the Prairie Pests, and rightly, too. The way they gain information is simply remarkable. They know there is some gold in this train, and they mean to have it. That man was one of their spies. Not a word of this to any one else, just yet. To-night we must keep a good watch. These are desperate men, and we shall have hard work to escape with our lives."

"Ay, that you will, major," muttered Arkansaw, who had been an unseen listener to all this, "and it's my private opinion that not one of you will reach Saint Joe to tell the tale. When the captain makes up his mind to strike, no one has ever yet lived to relate how it was done. Now I'll go and keep a watch on that treasure-wagon, until midnight. The mine's set, the train laid, and I'm the man what's going to put the match to it."

A blazing fire in the center of the camp made the scene look cheerful.

Around this, half a dozen men were grouped, cooking supper for the respective parties.

It was no emigrant train; there was not a woman or child present. In all, there were fourteen men, and armed as they were, it would have been a very difficult task to have whipped them in a fair fight. Five of the wagons were the white canvas-top affairs such as were in general use upon the plains at the time I write of. These belonged to returning miners. They had gathered a little gold and were going East to spend it. The sixth wagon was a small affair, drawn by two spirited horses. It was the property of a little man named Doctor Schillar, who, with his brown, dried-up face, resembled an Egyptian mummy. He had a servant with him, who managed the horses, and looked after the doctor generally.

The seventh wagon was the mystery of the train. It was a large, square, box-like affair, somewhat like the cages in a menagerie, but unpainted, and very strong. What it contained, no man knew to a certainty, but shrewd guesses were made, although they differed greatly. Three men had this wagon of mystery in their charge, and they never left it alone for a minute, although it was usually separated from the rest. Arkansaw, the hairy-faced guide, had hit upon what he was ready to swear was the real state of affairs. What the opinion of this "gentleman" was, and his intentions in regard to the strange wagon, the reader will soon learn.

The night passed on, and silence deep and profound fell upon the camp. But there was at least one, besides the sentry, who did not sleep!

CHAPTER III.

ARKANSAW THE GUIDE.

MIDNIGHT was close at hand.

The moon had sailed high in the heavens, and was pouring down a flood of light upon the level prairie. Major Handy had been sleeping near one of the wagons, but he was now wide awake, and listening to the distant wolves as they howled in concert at the silvery disk overhead.

All at once the major raised his head. His attitude was that of a man who had heard something that he wished to have repeated before feeling convinced that his ears had not deceived him.

Again the sound came floating on the gentle

night-breeze. There could be no mistaking it this time.

"Confound it, I could swear to the tremulous whistle. Can it be that same fellow back again? And, what does he mean by that whistle?"

The major's thoughts were interrupted by the very whistle itself, actually in the camp! He instantly bounded to his feet.

"Can the fellow be among the wagons? Impossible, for Arkansaw is on duty over there. It must be a sort of frog, as he said. Surely a man coming to play the part of spy would not continually betray himself in that way. There's no use in my trying to sleep, so I might as well saunter in that direction. This time my rifle shall bear me company, and if I get another crack at master spy, he shall feel the weight of lead."

When the major reached the spot where he had seen Arkansaw but a few moments before, that individual was not in sight.

He was about to utter some exclamation that would express the surprise he felt, when a moving object some little distance out on the prairie caught his eye. The mist so often seen in the West had descended, and although objects in the camp could be readily distinguished, yet, when the eye sought a subject a hundred feet away, a thin veil seemed to rise up and throw a soft haze upon it.

That the moving thing was a man, the major knew without argument, and his first thought was that it must be the outlaw spy who had been prowling about the camp earlier in the evening, and at whom he had fired a shot from his revolver without success.

Acting upon the impulse of the moment, he sunk upon one knee, and threw his rifle up to his shoulder. Just at this instant, however, the man arose from his knees and assumed a bent attitude as he walked away from the camp. Major Handy drew a long breath and lowered his rifle.

It was Arkansaw, their hairy guide!

"Be careful, my fine boy, how you send bullets around promiscuously, or some day you may shoot a friend. Arkansaw has heard that whistle, and has determined to see what it is. I shall follow, too. He may need help."

Saying which the major, unsuspecting of what he was about to hear in the next few moments, made his way out between two of the wagons, onto the open prairie.

Major Handy had seen border service, young man that he was, and had learned prairie lore from some of the most famous of scouts.

He immediately sunk upon his hands and knees and began crawling rapidly in the direction the guide had gone.

Arkansaw moved away from the camp for about a hundred yards. Then he came to a halt and gave that low, tremulous whistle. It was immediately answered from a spot further out upon the prairie, and toward which he at once hurried.

A form arose before him, gaunt, and specter-like, in the moonlight.

"Dave, that you?" called out Arkansaw, in a shrill whisper.

"Bet your shekels, old boss" returned the man.

In another moment their hands had crossed.

"You came mighty near ruining everything, awhile back. What in the foul fiend tempted you? I said midnight," growled Arkansaw.

"I know it, old boss. Here's how it happened: captain sent me out to scout around. I thought I'd just try the old signal for fun."

"And it came near being more than fun for you. 'Tain't often Major Handy misses his game, like that," the guide growled.

"Ah! the major's on hand, is he? We have an old account standing that must be settled now or never. I reckon he don't forget Arizona, Dave, nor does this chicken's ears cherish any fond remembrance of him. Curse him, I say! But, look here, Arkansaw; I reckon we'll clean 'em out to-night. The boys are anxious. Captain wants to know about that wagon full of gold."

"Now you've got it wrong. That's a treasure in the wagon that money couldn't buy, so I heard that long-legged feller say. He's imposed on the rest, and has a man inside that gives a screech now and then, to make out he's crazy. That's what the rest believe—that there is a madman in it. All humbug! What would they call him a treasure, a priceless treasure, for? I ain't scouted around and listened to them three men talk, for nothing. You mark my words, Dave, that's jewels in that wagon, meant for some European prince or other, that'll make every man of us rich for life."

"Thunder!" ejaculated the spy.

"I've heard that howl myself, and it does sound like the devil himself was let loose, but I've heard 'em talk of their little game, and I reckon I see through it. Three of 'em keep guard outside and one inside—this last feller to play mad. I've seen 'em sneak off meat and such stuff when they thought no one was looking. I must go, Dave; they might miss me. About two hours from now—the old signal. I'll dispose of the men on guard with my knife. Not a man must escape, especially any of them dark, foreign-looking chaps what run the treasure-wagon. You understand?"

"You bet, old boss!" returned the spy.

"Then away with ye," ordered Arkansaw.

Waiting until Arizona Dave had vanished, the false guide turned his face toward the camp. As he stepped inside the circle, something cold pressed against his forehead and sent a shudder through his frame.

"Move a hand or foot, you fiend, and I fire," said the major's stern tones.

CHAPTER IV.

ROARING RALPH STRIKES A TRAIL.

ROARING RALPH could not help giving an exclamation when the tall figure arose seemingly out of the very ground, and stood before him in such a theatrical attitude.

"You call, and I am here," said this individual in a deep voice that resembled the rolling thunder of an approaching storm.

"What under the sun do you want?" asked Ralph in surprise.

"Man wants but little here below—" began the deep-tongued fellow.

"And he shan't want that little long. I'm a dangerous man to trifle with. You behold in me the rough ranger of the Colorado, Roaring Ralph Rockwood, you bet. Who the devil are you?"

"I am thy father's ghost!" responded the thunder tones.

"Then there's going to be a dead ghost around here, pretty quick. You've insulted me, and I'm generous enough to let you attend your own funeral. There, take that," and the rough ranger banged away with his pistol, full at the other's head as it seemed.

It was laughable to witness the way in which the tall man avoided the shot. He seemed to draw his head in between his shoulders, and shut up like a telescope.

"For God's sake hold on, Rockwood; would you murder a friend? I'm Blue Bob, of Kentucky," cried the man as he dodged around.

"Oh; you are, eh? Well, I thought I should get something intelligible out of you, at last! Blue Bob, come here and give us your paw. They told me you'd try your game when we met, but I knew a trick worth two of it. Don't ever attempt it again, old boy, for it's dangerous work," the Colorado ranger advised.

"So, you're Roaring Ralph? I'm glad to meet ye. Heard what you said a minute ago, and couldn't resist the temptation. Bless if I try it again. I heard the lead whistle past my ear," declared the long man as he seized hold of the other's hand.

"So, you're the man who can tell me where to find the one I seek, Archer Fleming?" said Roaring Ralph, interrogatively.

"You just bet your money on it! Buckskin Dick was with me, some time back, and was telling that yarn of your getting among the Blackfeet, two years ago, when he happened

to mention that you were on the hunt for that man. Dick saw me start at the name, so I told him I knew just where to lay hands on Archer Fleming. He said you'd give a heap to know, so I said, send him here."

"I've had a hard time coming. In the first place I was waylaid by a lot of scoundrels and taken a prisoner to the mountains, but I succeeded in giving 'em the slip. I was again surrounded by the Prairie Pests, not ten miles from here, and had quite a tussle before getting away. Daring Dick would give something for my body now, seeing that I know his secret!"

"Aha! you know it! There was no use in coming on to me then. How did you get into the secret?" asked Blue Bob.

"The secret I mention remains with me until I have occasion to make use of it. This Daring Dick had better keep out of my way, or I shall let this search for Archer Fleming drop, to turn on him. Why he has taken such an intense hatred for me I can't tell."

"Reckon he knows you're hunting for him," suggested Blue Bob, quietly.

"I told you I had nothing to do with this handsome devil."

"But, he has something to do with you! When a man hears that a feller of your caliber is searching high and low for him, and swearing again and again to be the death of him, that critter ain't a-going to stand around with his hands in his pockets, you bet."

"What do you mean, Blue Bob?" demanded the ranger.

"Daring Dick is the man you're looking for—Archer Fleming."

"Blue blazes! how d'ye know this?" spluttered Roaring Ralph.

"That's another asides ye a-looking for him, old boss. More than that I shan't say. Ye can't have the same reason to hate Archer Fleming as this other person, but I thought it no harm to put ye on the trail."

"And I thank you for it, Blue Bob. Shake hands again! I'll tell ye some time what cause I have to hate this man, even though I never set eyes on him. I swore that when I once struck his trail, I'd never drop it till the critter had caved in, and now I've struck it. You're my friend after this, Blue Bob, by jingo! That's me, Roaring Ralph Rockwood, you bet!" and the ranger dismounted in order to throw his arms around the tall hunter and hug him, a proceeding that elicited various grunts and groans from the object of this tender solicitude, whose bones actually cracked under the infliction.

"Might I ask what you intend doing now?" from Blue Bob, who was ruefully rubbing his hands along his aching ribs.

"Well, if you've any ranch handy, and was very pressing—"

"My home is humble enough, being a cavern in among the hills yonder, but, so far, it has been a safe retreat against the reds and these Prairie Pests, although the Indians have been hunting me pretty lively of late. If you'll condescend to share the place, such as it is, you're welcome."

"Consarn it, Blue Bob, have I bunked in the open air these ten years and more, to turn up my nose at a snug retreat such as you mention? I reckon I could tell you a yarn about a bed I once slept in, under the roof of a St. Louis gambling-house, that would make your hair rise. What is that, rising yonder? The foot-hills, I declare, and not half a mile away! Those legs equal a horse's trot, Blue Bob!"

Reaching the hills, the tall hunter, who lived such a solitary life in this region, showed Roaring Ralph a natural inclosure where he could leave his horse, and then led the way to his cavern home. The entrance to this was concealed by hanging vines that covered the rocky face of the cliff. Entering, Blue Bob brought his companion to the living room, as he called the cavern to which the passage ran.

But, during the hunter's absence, his enemies had discovered his retreat and laid a trap for him. Even as he applied a light to the

torch he held, several dusky figures, crouched against the wall of the cavern, caught his eye, and with a yell, Blue Bob dashed the torch violently to the ground.

CHAPTER V.

DESPERATE REMEDIES.

ARKANSAW, the false guide, knew that the cold object that had pressed against his forehead was the muzzle of a revolver. He recognized the voice of Major Handy immediately, and having a certain healthy respect for that gentleman, he could not help shuddering at the thought of how near he was to death.

"I cave, major; don't fire. What's up?" he exclaimed, hastily.

"Your game's up, my jail-bird. I heard all. Men like our brave fellows here will soon have you up with a rope to support you. Ha!"

The major's last exclamation was caused by a sudden movement on the part of the hairy man. Arkansaw knew at once that everything was lost, and his life, in the bargain, if he suffered himself to remain a prisoner, now that his treachery was known. Desperate men often resort to desperate remedies. It was sure death to be held by the major, while a loop-hole of escape offered itself in a bold dash.

He was well acquainted with Major Handy's marksmanship, and knew that if he simply turned and ran, a bullet would most likely cut short his career. He must first knock the major down, or otherwise dispose of him, and afterward shape his further conduct.

The revolver cracked as Arkansaw suddenly sprung forward, with the agility of a panther. His movement succeeded in disconcerting the soldier so that the bullet missed its aim, but, so close was the discharge, that the hair on the guide's face was singed.

The two men clinched. Both were possessed of strength above the ordinary, and for a moment a terrible struggle ensued. Arkansaw knew that his only chance of escape lay in first disposing of the other, and the major seemed as equally determined not to be disposed of.

How it would have ended had the two men been left to themselves, no one can say, as they were pretty evenly matched. First, one was on top and then the other. It was while Arkansaw had the advantage, and was vainly endeavoring to get out his knife, in order to dispose of the major, that several of the train men reached the spot, and stood looking calmly on, as if it was merely a fight. Arkansaw would not inform them as to the truth, and the major scorned to ask for assistance.

At this juncture a new personage appeared upon the scene. Where he came from no one could say, as they were too much engaged in watching the silent struggle to note outside affairs. The stranger strode into the circle. He was a dashing-looking young man, with a bronzed face, a drooping mustache of a tawny hue, and manly proportions, such as Apollo might have possessed. Dressed in a suit of buck-skin and wearing a slouched hat, he looked every inch a ranger.

Stepping up to the guide, he seized him by the throat, and exerting his strength, threw the man over on his back. Having accomplished this extraordinary feat, the new-comer placed his foot upon the body of the prostrate man, and then turned to the major, who, now that he was relieved of his foe, arose nimbly to his feet.

"Major Handy, how are you?" said the ranger.

"Moccasin Mat, by all that's wonderful!" exclaimed the soldier, grasping the brown hand of the handsome Texan ranger.

They were old acquaintances, although it had been a year or more since their last meeting. Moccasin Mat was a noted hunter, and a dashing Indian-fighter. His comrades always put him forward as their pet and representative when a *fandango* was in progress.

"Tell your friends to tie this reptile," said Mat, pointing to the false guide, who was writhing under the pressure of his foot.

A murmur arose from the men. To them it

had been a simple tussle between the major and the guide, who had failed to pull together from the beginning, and even the hand Mat had taken in the affair had not been relished by the lovers of fair play.

In a few words Major Handy explained the guide's treachery. Looks of incredulity soon changed to scowls of anger, for the major was well known and universally liked, while the guide, on the other hand, had never taken the trouble to gain the favor of the men.

"I heard the whole of it, every word," said Moccasin Mat quietly, as the men bound the arms of the sullen guide. "You see I heard one of your horses whinny, and was cautiously approaching this place, when a man on horseback passed me. I stood as still as a rock. He dismounted, and I the same. Then I followed him on foot till he met that devil. What passed the major has told. I came after him to the camp. The bullet that was fired came within a foot of my head, and I thought it was meant for me, at first."

"You know the danger we are in; what would you advise us to do, Mat?" asked the major, anxiously.

"These Prairie Pests will make an attack, that is certain. It remains to be seen how they will fight. You are far from the main trail; this hound must have brought you here, on purpose. Tribes of hostile Indians lie on almost every side, and the route to the trail is beset with danger and death. The caravan is lost. Are there any women here?"

"Nary a chick or woman," responded one of the teamsters.

"Thank Heaven for that. You can fight your way through, I reckon. This is no place for a camp when there is a better close at hand. Hardly a mile away lie the remains of a small *motte* of timber that has been pretty well demolished by a hurricane. We must reach that before the attack comes. If you are caught on the open prairie by those fiends I wouldn't give much for your chances. Major, you command here, I reckon?"

"Hardly; we have no commander," responded the soldier.

"There must be a recognized authority in all things. We rangers always give up to the most experienced. I know you are an old hand at such things. We'll make the major our captain, eh, boys?"

Almost every man in the train had now gathered around, and they responded unanimously. A few orders were given, and the quiet camp was quickly changed to a scene of bustling activity.

Everything was done in absolute silence, however—the usual cheery cries of the teamsters being kept for another time.

At last all was ready.

CHAPTER VI.

THE PRAIRIE STOCKADE.

MOCCASIN MAT had, in the meantime, after seeing that the men were working with a will, gone to the outside of the camp, and raising a curiously carved whistle to his lips, blown several shrill notes with it.

A moment later and the pounding of hoofs was heard. Instinct must have aided the horse to find its master, for it went directly to him.

"Good Stormcloud," said Mat, fondling the velvety muzzle.

The horse was as black as night, and a most beautiful animal.

When everything was announced as ready, the ranger led the way, mounted on Stormcloud. Major Handy had made use of his men by putting out flankers. Seven of them drove the wagons. The other six walked.

Even little Doctor Schillar presented himself for duty, and formed one of the rear guard, bearing a German rifle of exquisite workmanship over his shoulder.

The doctor had many precious things in his light, covered wagon—at least they were so to the medical fraternity, though worthless to men ignorant of their qualities, and he would

not suffer them to fall into vandal hands without exerting himself in their defense.

Major Handy and the dashing ranger led the wagon-train.

They were not over fifteen minutes on the way, and at the end of that time Moccasin Mat announced the timber at hand.

"Call a halt here, while I go forward and reconnoiter. It would be worse than camping on the open prairie, if the Pests had taken up their quarters here before us."

Saying which, he slid from the saddle, and placing his rifle in his friend's hands, disappeared among the tall grass, which seemed to grow in patches.

Major Handy had the wagons drawn up close together. Then he waited for the return of the ranger. He was absently looking at the ground, when his eyes were attracted to a white object that glistened in the moonlight. He urged his horse a few steps forward. A cry of horror broke from his lips. There was no need of bending forward in the saddle to make it out. The major had seen too many such things not to be able to recognize it at his first good glance.

It was a human skull!

The frontal bone had a round ragged hole in it, that marked the passage of the bullet. Major Handy involuntarily cast his eyes further on.

Another glistening object; another skull.

An exclamation from one of the teamsters told that he had come across other hideous objects.

Were they treading on consecrated ground? Was this an Indian burial-place, or had the silent prairie been the scene of a fierce battle?

Most probably the latter was the case. Perhaps Moccasin Mat could inform him. He would ask when the ranger returned.

We will follow the dashing hunter.

When he had gone over twenty yards, he came upon the first prostrate tree. A hurricane had at some day, long past, swept the little *motte* of timber completely out of existence, only a few trees remaining to shield the spring of water from the glowing heat of the sun. The tree trunks lay around in profusion, and yet one could almost imagine that they had been touched by human hands, such was the admirable precision with which some of the smaller ones had been arranged so as to form a breastwork.

All was quiet among the fallen trees. Moccasin Mat scouted the whole place through, after which he returned to the train.

A few moments later the wagons were in the stockade, the horses unhitched and fastened securely, and the men acting under the major's orders, engaged in strengthening the defenses of the place by moving some of the logs. Major Handy at length drew near the ranger.

"Surely this place has seen service before. These logs and tree-trunks never fell naturally into such positions," he declared.

Moccasin Mat smiled almost sadly.

"I had a hand in fixing 'em myself. I have reason to remember this place. Twelve of us, prairie rangers every one, held out against about three hundred Indians for three days," said he.

"Indeed! Then these bones out yonder—" ventured the major.

"Are Indian bones. You'll find 'em all around the place. We made it a regular bone-yard for 'em. We came out first best, but three as fine fellows as ever drew breath, went under here. We planted the boys over yonder, and I believe the graves haven't ever been touched. You've heard me speak of Fighting Bill Tucker; he was one. The others were Buckskin Bill and Smith. Old Smith we called him, and he made the name a famous one in Texas. Deaf Smith others named him."

"I've heard of all of them. Poor fellows! and they are buried there? But, how did the rest of you get off? Was the siege broken?"

"Nary break, major! Those reds were wolves; they wanted blood. We saw the ease 'as gone, and determined to make a bolt for 't.

Roaring Ralph of the Colorado canyon was the one who proposed it. He was cut up fearful, but hung on through it. In fact, all of the boys were badly hurt. We had nine good horses left, and it was just such a night as this that we sailed in to cut our way through or die in the attempt. Luck was with us; we struck the weakest side of the reds. The very thought of the struggle that followed, makes me feel sick. My arm grew tired of killing. But we broke away at last and escaped from the devils. I tell you it was a sorry-looking gang that came into the fort, a week later. We had planted poor Texas Joe on the road, and old Blue Breeches was dying. The rest of us had quite a spell, but got over it," and the ranger walked away overcome with his recollections.

The night passed on.

Every man was at his station, rifle in hand, ready to meet the cruel and bloodthirsty foe.

Major Handy was standing near the stockade, when a hand touched his arm.

"Listen and you'll hear something. I heard that signal several times repeated. They'll go forward to find out why the answer—"

The ranger was interrupted by a chorus of savage shouts coming from the direction of their late camping-place.

"I suppose they can't help but find us?" queried the soldier.

"A blind man could follow the wagon-ruts. In ten minutes they'll be here. We have a hostage—why, hello, where's the prisoner?"

True enough, the traitor guide had disappeared.

CHAPTER VII.

OUT OF THE TOILS.

ARKANSAW had been carried in one of the vehicles, still bound hand and foot, and after the camp was gained, the guide had been thrown upon the ground near one of the wagons with as little ceremony as if he had been a log of wood instead of a human being. Honest men hate villainy in all its branches, especially when it is directed toward themselves, and what little respect these fellows had felt for Arkansaw, had vanished with his downfall. The traitor cursed each one of his enemies separately and then the whole of them collectively, and the oaths of vengeance he mentally breathed were absolutely numberless.

With a rage that showed itself plainly on his face, he watched their preparations for defense. All at once an expression of satisfaction flitted across his hairy visage. Something sharp had cut into one of his hands, as he rolled restlessly about.

It was a piece of a broken blade, which, rusty and unseen, had lain here for many a day.

Not having heard Moccasin Mat's short story of the terrible defense he and his valiant comrades had made in this very stockade, the guide would have been at a loss to tell how the steel had come there at such an opportune time, but for that he cared little. The only fact that interested him was its being at hand to aid him. Arkansaw seldom hunted up the cause, when the effect was all that would aid him.

He knew his life was at stake, and lost no time in setting to work. When a man labors under as many difficulties as he did, it is no wonder that time passes with but little result. It actually took the guide very nearly an hour to get that broken knife-blade into such a position that he could work it, for he had to make sure that his every movement seemed to be a natural one.

When at length this feat was accomplished, he began the painful work of drawing his bound wrists over the edge of the steel. It was far from being sharp, as the rust had eaten away all semblance of an edge, but Arkansaw persisted in his labor with a determination that might have been worthier of a better cause. His wrists were torn and bleeding, but with every fresh cut he clenched his teeth and breathed a curse.

At length, growing desperate, he rubbed his wrists violently along the blade, regardless of

the pain that was the inevitable result. His hands fell apart; the stout cord had given way at last.

Arkansaw lay back and breathed hard for almost ten minutes. Then the time had come for him to make his escape.

Watching his opportunity, he saw that no one was near him to frustrate his intended movement. The moon was the only illumination, and he cared not for that, just then. To roll over and over, until in the shadow of the nearest wagon, was but the work of an instant. No time must be lost, for should he be discovered, nothing could save him.

In his breast he carried a small knife. This was out like a flash, and the guide slashed away at the cords that bound his feet. Before this influence, his bonds fell apart. He was free!

Arkansaw was not the man to shout, however, until he was out of the woods. With a nervous rapidity, that would have been ludicrous on a less dangerous occasion, he scrambled under the wagon, and finding that none of the men were near at hand, made his way over the logs.

Then the danger of proceeding further struck him. The grass only grew in patches; there were five chances in ten that he would be seen, and if once the major or Moccasin Mat discovered him, a bullet would be pretty apt to speedily end his difficulties. There was only one course left open. He must remain hidden among the fallen trees until his comrades made their assault, or else the moon went down, leaving the field to darkness.

He heard the shouts of his friends come booming over the prairie, and knew they would soon be on hand. If a direct assault was made he might receive a stray bullet, being between the parties. Not liking this prospect he crouched lower than ever, and when the hunter made the alarming discovery that their prisoner was *non est*, that worthy was grinning to himself even while he shivered, not three feet away.

Knowing that the enemy would soon be upon them, every man drew back the hammer of his rifle and waited. The minutes passed by, and Mat, who, after a hurried search for the guide within the limits of the camp, had returned again to the major's side, declared it was time the outlaws should make their appearance.

Hardly had the words left his lips before the thud of many hoofs could be heard. The Prairie Pests were coming at a tearing gallop.

"We'll put a stop to that, mighty quick," said Mat, grimly, throwing up his rifle as he spoke. Another instant and moving objects could be seen. Before the rest of those within the stockade could distinguish between horse and riders, the ranger's rifle had sounded, sharp and deadly.

A shrill scream, and a wild plunge followed. Then one of the horses was seen to be riderless. Like a flash the others separated, and the men vanished behind their steeds.

Although bold and daring when the occasion demanded, these outlaws could also be cautious. They knew of fourteen men behind the wagons. True, one was supposed to be in sympathy with their cause, but the failure of their plans made it look bad for the guide.

They disappeared like shadows, horses and all. One could almost imagine they had melted away into thin air, but for the hoof-strokes that accompanied their withdrawal. Even these soon ceased, and but for the distant howls of wolves and coyotes, silence reigned.

"Now, boys, keep your eyes skinned. They're worse than Indians, for a red knows when he's whipped, and makes tracks. These fellows have some bull-dog blood in 'em. Watch the grass and fire at every moving object. Bullets count now. We'll see lively times before morning."

And Arkansaw, hearing this from the hunter, determined to lay low, so that his carcass might not be the recipient of a counting bullet.

The moments dragged along, each seeming

interminable to these men, who knew that deadly foes were creeping closer and closer.

Moccasin Mat leaned forward, glanced along the barrel of his rifle, and then the sharp report rung out. It was the signal for the ball to commence.

CHAPTER VIII.

BLUE BOB BECOMES A VAGRANT.

BLUE BOB of Kentucky was not the man to feel fear even when such a sensation might have been deemed pardonable. He was prudent at all times, totally unlike the reckless Colorado ranger, but, nevertheless, just as brave. Impulse caused him to dash the torch to the rocks at his feet and extinguish it when the light had shown him that his cavern home was already occupied by the red-skins, who had been quietly awaiting his return.

He dropped like a flash when darkness had followed his speedy movement, pulling Roaring Ralph down with him. A gun sounded, and the glare showed the point from whence the discharge came. In all probability the bullet passed through the air in the very spot where their bodies had been. A howl from the other side of the cavern, followed by a shuffling sound, as if some one was trying his utmost to dance a hornpipe on one leg, testified that the bullet had found its billet.

The Indians now made a serious blunder. Those near the wounded warrior thought, and very naturally, too, under the circumstances, that the shot had come from one of the pale-faces, and they hastened to bang away. To this discharge there was an immediate response.

While this was going on, Blue Bob had drawn his companion toward the entrance. Creeping along the rocky floor, they escaped the bullets that were now beginning to hurtle around.

"Kilkenny cats. Let 'em fight it out," whispered Bob, when they had gained the narrow passage.

"I'd like mighty well to go back and clear what's left of the critters out of existence," said the Colorado ranger, wistfully.

"Ha! they've struck a light. Here they come!" exclaimed Bob.

Luckily for the Indians, they possessed a shrewd chief for a leader, who soon discovered that the yells from both sides were from dusky throats, and who called for a cessation of hostilities until he could ignite the torch he held. When this was done, the awful truth that while they had been whacking away at each other, the enemy had escaped, stared them in the face. One man dead, another with a useless leg, and still a third seriously wounded, no wonder the Indians were hopping mad. It was manifest that the whites had made their escape by means of the passage, and toward this the Indians rushed, led by the chief bearing his torch.

Fatal light. At least so it proved to him, for hardly had half the length of the passage been traversed when two rifle-cracks rung out with deafening reverberations.

The chief and his right-hand man received the bullets that were intended for them. With a shriek, the warrior plunged forward and fell on his face. His body writhed with the convulsive throes of death, and his hands shut and opened for half a moment. As for the chief, he sunk quivering to the ground, the ball having cleft his heart.

The torch fell on the rocks, spluttered up into life, died down, and then the blaze went out altogether, leaving them in absolute darkness.

"Well, my home's gone up. I'm a vagrant now, a wanderer on the face of the earth," whined Blue Bob, as they cautiously made their way through the bushes after gaining the open air.

"Like myself, for instance. Well, old fellow, there's nothing to prevent you and I striking up a friendship that will last till one goes under. I said the same with Fighting Bill Tucker. He was keeled over by the reds. I

tell you he *was* a roarer. What say, Blue Bob?" ventured Ralph.

"Put it thar, pard. Arter this, we're one team," said the other.

"That's me, Roaring Ralph Rockwood, you bet! Now that we're down these blessed hills, whar's the next move? Reckon my hoss is all right. Take your own with him, and we'll give these hills a wide berth."

A few moments later and they were riding slowly along the prairie at the foot of the hills. The moon was just peeping up above the even profile that indicated the Eastern horizon, and soon her blood-red disk wheeled up into view.

"Where are you bound for?" asked Blue Bob, seeing that his companion seemed to be urging his horse as though he had a destination.

"That's a fact. Blue Bob, looky here. I've heard of you as a brave man. Do you dare to go with me?"

"Seeing as we've struck up a partnership, I'll go to the end of the world if ye say so. I've taken a shine to you, Roaring Ralph."

"Thank ye, Bob; I can rely on you. I'll tell you where I am going. Direct to the mountains, into the den of these Prairie Pests, and take that man or have his life."

"Good Lord! He's as bad as the other one, only she was a woman!" muttered Blue Bob to himself, as he surveyed his companion.

"What say you to this?" asked the reckless ranger.

"Lay on, Macduff! and cursed be he who first cries out enough!" I'm with you, tooth and nail," came, in Bob's rolling tones.

"Then listen, and I will tell you what cause I have to hate that man," and as they rode onward, side by side, Roaring Ralph related a story so full of horror that his companion could not help shivering.

Several times he cast a furtive glance at the Colorado ranger and then shook his head as if something puzzled him.

"Can it be," he muttered, "that they have the same cause to hate this handsome devil, Daring Dick? But no, the idea is absurd. She would not tell me her story, much as I pressed her. Ah! Roaring Ralph, you will have to make haste or some one will step in between your vengeance and its victim!"

Side by side the two men rode on. The moon swung upward in its circle, and the prairie was illuminated almost like day. Miles had been passed over since leaving Blue Bob's cavern-home. It was at length decided to camp until morning.

At dawn a fire was started, and after Blue Bob had killed a deer, some steaks were cooked.

Then, in the saddle again, and dashing toward the north-west at a swinging gallop. The foot-hills had vanished, and the great Rockies reared their majestic heads in the distance. By night they would be very close to their destination, so Ralph declared, and he ought to know, having just come from the robber stronghold.

CHAPTER IX.

THE LION-HUNTERS AT BAY.

A ROMAN form sprung into view among the patches of tall grass when the young hunter's rifle rung out upon the night air. The man's arms were tossed wildly in the air as his death-shriek rung out. Then the ill-fated fellow vanished from sight.

Moccasin Mat was standing close beside the major. Immediately after firing the fatal shot he put his hand upon the other's arm, and the soldier turned to survey him with wonder when he found that hand quivering as if the hunter had taken a severe chill.

"Always has that effect on me," said Mat, apologetically, "not that I am afraid; never knew what that feeling was. Sort of nervous I guess. Don't interfere with my aim. Ah; see there!"

Major Handy's rifle flew to his shoulder.

The man who had incautiously shown himself while bounding from one clump of grass to

the shelter of another, succeeded in reaching his place of refuge, but as he vanished, the soldier fired. From the curses that proceeded from the tuft one would think he had been hit, but, whether this was true or not, he possessed enough sense to keep his body well concealed.

Our friends had no time to waste more bullets on him, as other affairs claimed their undivided attention.

Guns began sounding on all sides, and the balls rattled against the logs and sung weird melodies as they hustled through the air.

Moccasin Mat understood the tactics of the outlaws at once. Under cover of this fire, an assaulting party intending doing their work.

The word was passed around immediately, and although those within the stockade were careful not to expose themselves when it could be avoided, they withheld their fire.

It was a wise precaution.

Dark forms suddenly sprung into view.

There were three parties, attacking the train at as many different quarters.

Major Handy, the hunter and three of the teamsters engaged one of these bodies of assailants. The bullets that were poured into them proved too much for their valor, and they melted away into the deceptive moonlight, like so many phantoms.

During the interchange of shots, the treacherous guide lay huddled up just outside the fort, fearful lest a ball from his friends might find him out.

The second party was no more successful. They were met by a fearfully destructive fire from the doctor, his servant, the remaining two teamsters, and the only personage in the train whom the reader has not been made acquainted with, a Spanish gentleman whose noble-looking face told that he was a true *hidalgo*. Several of the Prairie Pests met their death before they broke and fled.

But, the third storming-party possessed an advantage. In the first place they equaled both of the others in point of numbers. Then again, their assault being directed against that part of the stockade where the mysterious wagon lay with the two horses still attached to it, they had only the three bronzed men who spoke a foreign language among themselves, to contend against.

These three keepers possessed short rifles of a strange pattern, but they had hunted the lion in his native jungle too often to feel even a twinge of fear, and every time one of these weapons sounded, it bored a hole completely through the object at which it was aimed. In half a minute the outlaws were close up to the wagon, from which a strange moaning sound issued, as if a wounded man lay within.

Wounded as they now were, the three dark-faced men stood at their posts without flinching, and fired shot after shot from their revolvers with deadly result.

Nor were they left long alone to stand the brunt of the attack. Four of the others hurried to their assistance, and as the hoarse bark from their firearms chimed in, those of the Prairie Pests who were able vanished with commendable agility.

"So far so good," cried Major Handy, reloading his rifle.

"You do well to say so. Some men would have declared that the affair was over. You have seen too much service, major, to be deceived."

"I know these scoundrels too well to think they would give up an object until their case was hopeless. These few men they can well afford to lose, and it will only make them the more savage for our blood. Oh, no; they'll stick by us until morning."

"I go further than you, major. I am positive that even daylight will not end our troubles. These fiends must number fifty or more, and doubtless they have more not many miles away. That devil of a treacherous guide has taken you very near their mountain stronghold. What is to hinder their commencing an actual siege, that can only have one result unless aid arrives?"

"My God! I hope they won't attempt it. We have provisions for a few days, but beyond that we would starve. At the fort the train men expected to lay in a stock before starting further East. What would you advise, Mat?" asked the major, anxiously.

"I believe you are to take command at the fort?"

"Yes, I am on my way there."

"And expected?"

"I suppose so, seeing that my orders came through Colonel Woolwich, who is on duty there at present, and I sent him word by a courier of my coming. Why do you ask?"

"They may be out on the prairie looking for you. But that hope is very feeble, indeed. Some one must ride to the fort, and I am the man to do it. When the moon is hidden behind those clouds that are sailing along the Western sky, I'll make a dash through. I know these outlaws too well to think they would let us slip, believing what they do," averred the hunter.

They were still standing in the same place, but Arkansaw did not hear what they talked about, for the simple reason that he had changed his base. After the firing was over he had crawled along outside the stockade, in the direction of the spot where the wagon of mystery stood.

Crouched down close to this he listened to the savage growls that came from the box affair with a knowing grin, as if to signify that he understood their tricks.

What he was up to will soon be made manifest.

CHAPTER X.

GALLANT MOCCASIN MAT.

It was past midnight.

The fair mistress of the night had completed half of her journey, and was now sailing down the Western sky, where the clouds mentioned by Moccasin Mat scurried along to meet her halfway. Silence brooded over the prairie, but there was something oppressive about it.

Those within the stockade still kept up their watch, and Arkansaw crouched near the treasure-wagon, trembling from having lain in one position so long.

"It is almost time," said Moccasin Mat, pointing to the sky, where the moon and clouds had neared each other.

"Then you think it necessary that you should go?" asked the major.

"Some one ought to, and why not I? There is no one to mourn for me if I fall. The train can never pass these outlaws if they choose to post themselves in your path. All that would be necessary to delay your progress, would be to shoot the horses. No, major, there is only one means of escape that I can see. I must go."

"But, my brave fellow, you are risking your life for strangers."

"Pshaw! don't mention it. I tell you, we rangers live on excitement. Young as I am, I have faced death dozens of times, until I actually believe I am not fated to die with my boots on. Why, such a dash as this will be to me what a dress-parade is to you soldiers, or a banquet to a lover. I love danger. She has been courted by me since I was a mere strippling, ha! ha!" and the bold ranger actually laughed.

"And some day she will wed you—to death. Moccasin Mat, you are a brave man. I never have felt for any one—any man, I mean—what I do for you. If I were a girl, you would be my ideal of a hero, a bold, gallant knight, whom I should love while I lived."

"Come, come, major; I shall never be loved in that way, although there is a tender spot 'way down in my heart for one I met many months ago, but whom I never spoke to, and probably never shall see again. Something in her face set my heart to throbbing as it never did before, and I thought I had met my fate; but, at the sound of my voice, she vanished like a spirit. But this will never do. I must

get ready, major, for work," saying which, Mat strode over to his horse.

Major Handy looked after him reflectively.

"He is certainly the finest man I ever met. I trust that he will some day be happy in the love of a true woman. Ah! me, I shall soon see my darling again, and then we shall part no more. It was more than kindness that brought about this change from the Pacific coast, and I shall never forget the general. The colonel meets his wife at my old station, while I am going to one who is dearer than all the world to me. There, Mat is ready. Another moment and the moon will have disappeared."

Even as the major spoke, fair Luna took a last lingering look at the scene below and then hid her face behind the clouds that had slowly crept up like a heavy mist. Moccasin Mat bounded into the saddle, and adjusted his feet to the stirrups. His trusty rifle was slung at his back. One hand grasped a revolver; the other held the bridle.

After bidding the major good-by, and adding a few parting injunctions as to what was best to do, the ranger spoke a word to Stormcloud, and in another instant had vanished from the view of his friends.

The intelligent animal seemed to know what was expected of him, for he stepped so lightly that hardly the slightest sound followed his passage over the prairie.

Arkansaw had been greatly startled when he heard voices close to him, and a horseman come out of the stockade. He flattened himself against the logs, and the darkness that was proving so friendly to Moccasin Mat, aided him also.

The ranger kept his horse down to a walk, for fear of making a noise that would betray him, if he went at a faster pace. In a short time he heard voices on one side. Then the same thing greeted him from the right hand. He was in the midst of his foes, they having doubtless stationed themselves in a sort of circle around the rude prairie fort, so that any effort to move the wagons would be immediately detected.

That he would get through their line without a brush, Mat had not thought possible, but it seemed as though such a thing was about to happen, for the voices were already in his rear.

At this critical juncture, however, the treacherous moon suddenly sailed out into a clear space, where the clouds had broken since his leaving the wagon-train behind him.

This unexpected appearance of her majesty came very near spoiling more than one plan. Shouts and shots, coming from the direction of the stockade, seemed to indicate another assault, and yet there was something about it that would have puzzled Mat badly, had he been granted time to consider over it, as the rattle of wheels and a hoarse voice shouting to animals formed a portion of the row.

His own affairs demanded his undivided attention, however. No sooner had the moon illuminated the prairie than an exclamation in his rear, followed by the bang of a gun, informed the ranger that he was discovered. A word to his faithful steed, and Moccasin Mat was galloping madly away.

Several bullets plunged through the air not far from his head, and to avoid being hit, the ranger bent low in the saddle. Then followed a confused medley of sounds, which terminated at length in the thumping of hoofs. He was pursued. Turning his head, Mat could make out eight horsemen urging their animals by means of kicks and blows in the endeavor to overhaul him.

Moccasin Mat laughed softly to himself as he replaced the now useless revolver in his belt and unslung his rifle.

"I'll lessen their number, and then show them a clean pair of heels."

The sable steed suddenly came to a halt. Then followed the whip-like crack of the ranger's rifle. An outlaw pitched from the saddle, and as darkness again fell upon the

prairie for a moment, Mat dashed off like the wind.

Pursuit was useless, so the Prairie Pests turned back to discover what had occurred among their comrades to cause such a racket.

Arkansaw had a hand in it.

CHAPTER XI.

STRIKING HOME.

"HUSH! down with ye, Bob!"

It was Roaring Ralph who whispered this in his companion's ear.

Both men vanished behind the rocks like a flash. They were among the great mountains. The moon, shining from an unclouded sky, lit up the rocky cliffs and bluffs that towered high above them. The scene was wild and picturesque, and would have delighted the heart of Roaring Ralph at any other time, for he was an old mountain man, having hunted for years in the great Colorado canyon region.

Just at present however, he gave but little heed to the scenery, it being a matter of minor importance. Only a few days had elapsed since he was a prisoner in the stronghold of the outlaws. How he had escaped, taking with him his weapons and horse, I have not the time to explain just now, but the reader may rest assured that it was by one of those brilliant stratagems which had rendered the name of the Colorado ranger famous along the border.

Then, again, on the previous night, he had been completely surrounded by the lawless men who had such reason to hate him like poison, only escaping "by the skin of his teeth," as a border man would say.

After this experience with the Prairie Pests one would think that the ranger ought to willingly give them a wide berth. But, he was not the man to be intimidated by any living thing. He knew no such word as fear, and what Blue Bob had told him, made him resolve that before leaving this part of the country, he would wreak his vengeance on the leader of the Prairie Pests, whom he had sought so long, if it lay in human power to accomplish it.

Intent upon their daring plan of bearding the lion in his den, the two scouts had left their horses at the foot of the mountains, in a secure place that they had reached just as darkness came on. The ascent began immediately after they had partaken of a scanty supper, and after two hours of climbing over rough stones we find them near the robber stronghold.

The last half of their tedious climb had been much easier than the first, for the moon gave them not a little assistance. It was the sharp eyes of the Colorado ranger that had sighted danger, and he was not long in disposing of both himself and his comrade.

From around the ledge of rocks, the form of a man appeared. He carried a gun in his hands, and must have heard some slight noise, for he glanced sharply around him. Then, seeing nothing, he probably came to the conclusion that his ears must have deceived him, for he vanished once more behind the ledge of rocks.

"You said nothing of a sentry," whispered Blue Bob.

"They've put him at this back entrance since I made use of it."

"What's what, then?" queried Bob, sure of the coming reply.

Roaring Ralph touched the haft of his knife significantly.

"He must be disposed of, and I'm the man to do it," was Bob's reply.

"No, Blue Bob, this is my funeral. I run the affair, and must take all the risks I can. When I fail to do a job, I'll call on you. Hold my rifle while I set to work."

Blue Bob took the weapon, a little sullenly, it must be confessed, for he did not like the idea of letting his companion shoulder more than his share of the work. Perhaps the time would come, however, when the ranger would be glad of his assistance.

He watched Roaring Ralph as, knife in hand, he crawled forward in the shadow cast by the ledge, and could not but admire the catlike movements of his friend.

He saw the ranger peer cautiously around the bend. Doubtless what Ralph witnessed suited his plans exactly, for he crouched down as if gathering his forces for a spring.

All at once he vanished from the hunter's sight. A panther could not have made a more agile leap.

Blue Bob heard an exclamation that seemed choked in its birth.

Then there followed a scuffling sound, as if one heavy body was struggling fearfully to combat with another.

Standing a dozen yards away from the scene of action as he was, Blue Bob heard distinctly the sullen thud that told of a knife-blade crunching through flesh and sinew.

Silence, awful and significant, succeeded this last act in the drama.

A moment passed. Blue Bob was growing uneasy, when he saw his comrade appear in view and beckon to him.

Rounding the bend, he saw a motionless body lying in the shadow.

It was the sentinel, who had a few moments before stepped into view and took a survey of the rocks behind which they had lain.

Roaring Ralph had never yet been known to fail in anything he attempted. A dark stream trickled slowly over the rocky platform, coming from the shadow, and running over the edge, pattered upon the leaves of some bushes that grew from the face of the precipice.

It was human blood!

Accustomed as Blue Bob was to all the horrors of the battle-field, and the barbarities that distinguished life among the lawless men of the border, he could not help feeling a shudder run through him.

"What's what now?" he demanded, hoping to hear Ralph's plans.

"I am going into the viper's den," returned the ranger, calmly.

"And me?" questioned Blue Bob.

"You must assume this fellow's place. I can dress you up to resemble him, so that you can pass muster."

Bob hesitated a moment; then bit his lip. The thought of wearing this fellow's clothes was unpleasant, that was all that made him reflect.

"Just as you say, Ralph," he answered, at length.

"Thank you, Blue Bob," and the ranger pressed his hand.

In ten minutes Bob had been made to resemble the dead sentry so far as was possible. The outlaw, half-stripped of his clothes, had been dropped over the precipice, and after striking various ledges on the downward route, had reached the bottom.

A few parting words, and Roaring Ralph skulked along the ledge, leaving Blue Bob standing guard in the shadow.

Stirring events befell them both before they met again.

CHAPTER XII.

ARKANSAW IN LUCK.

ARKANSAW, the false guide, overreached himself.

While lying close up to the logs he could hear words that were dropped now and then by those within the stockade.

None knew better than he that the Prairie Pests had not abandoned the field of action. He could hear them shouting to one another, now and then, and as his own unpleasant, not to say dangerous situation, flashed into his mind whenever the inmates of the rude fort moved, he wished himself with his comrades.

It may be presumed that the treacherous guide watched the clouds that were so surely approaching the moon, with about as much interest as Moccasin Mat or the major himself. He had crawled close up to the treasure-wagon, and found himself contemplating

with bloodshot eyes, just as a starving man might gaze upon a bountiful meal.

A great idea suddenly entered his head, the magnificence of which almost dazzled him for the time being. The horses had been left attached to the treasure-car. Why the three foreign-looking men had committed this indiscretion was never fully explained. They were angry enough with themselves for it afterward. To Arkansaw it was as plain as daylight. The horses were swift-footed animals, as he well knew. They were in readiness for flight in case the outlaws seemed about to overwhelm the inmates of the stockade. Could he not save the foreign-looking men from this trouble?

The idea was so entrancing, that after chuckling over it, Arkansaw hugged himself in ecstasy and then crept closer.

He could hear a movement within the wagon. This was doubtless caused by the concealed man, who attempted to palm himself off as a madman. Catch a weasel asleep, will you? Arkansaw had cut his wisdom teeth, and understood this roaring and growling method of hiding the fact that there was a priceless treasure in the boxed-up wagon. Before another half-hour that fabulous amount might be in his possession. The thought was almost blinding.

The moon was now on the edge of the clouds. Arkansaw got himself in readiness for a spring. Just as he was about to leap upon the driver's box, and seize the lines and whip which he had taken notice were in their places, the sound of horse's hoofs coming down upon the prairie turf, made him crouch in his old position.

Moccasin Mat passed within a few feet of the traitor guide, and the latter might have touched him as he passed, had he chosen. At first Arkansaw thought they were about to desert the train, leaving it to its fate, and by forcing a way through the ranks of the enemy make good their escape. He soon discovered his mistake, and realized that one of the besieged was about to cut a passage through, in order to seek assistance. Perhaps the daring fellow hoped to escape being discovered at all!

Arkansaw's first thought was to hasten after Moccasin Mat and give the alarm to his friends, that they might either kill or capture the scout. He had even arisen cautiously to his feet to put this plan into execution, when his eyes fell upon the box-like form of the treasure-wagon, looming up in the darkness that had followed the retreat of the moon behind the dense clouds.

After all, what would it matter if this man *did* make his way through, if he (Arkansaw) could run off with the treasure car?

Major Handy soon withdrew from the spot where the scout had made his exit from the stockade, and taking the three men who guarded the strange wagon, to one side, began explaining Mat's mission and also what sort of a look-out they must keep for the outlaws.

Now was Arkansaw's time! The small knife that had already did him service in removing the bonds that secured his feet, was in his hands. To glide over to where the horses' heads were, was but the work of an instant. They were fastened to the rear of the next wagon with a strap. This his keen little blade quickly severed. Arkansaw then cautiously mounted to the seat. He knew the danger that surrounded his every movement. Should he be discovered, death would be meted out to him instantly, and yet such was his desire to possess himself of what he deemed a treasure that he willingly ran all the risk.

That treacherous moon!

Without any warning whatever, the fair mistress of the night suddenly shot out from behind the clouds. Arkansaw realized that he must not lose a second unless he wished to be sent to eternity with a bullet in his brain. A worse fate was reserved for him.

He gave a shout, at the same time using the whip and lines. The horses turned and dashed away at a breakneck speed. Several guns sounded and the balls roamed the air not far

from the fellow's head, but his time had not yet come. The three lion-hunters dashed after their precious charge, but, as the startled horses were going at full speed, they soon gave up the chase.

Arkansaw had carried off the treasure!

As he whirled through a group of Prairie Pests, they greeted him with loud shouts, and the false guide's heart throbbed with intense pride and satisfaction.

I can't say whether he really intended running away with the wagon or not, but one of his fellow outlaws seemed to fear as much, for, after Arkansaw had passed by, he leveled his gun and shot one of the horses. This brought the car to a dead stop.

Arkansaw leaped down, and seizing a large rock, proceeded to smash in the door in the rear which was secured by a padlock. His comrades heard a muttered oath, followed by a scream that was strangled in its birth. When they came up, they found Arkansaw lying on his back, dead, with his throat torn horribly.

A sable-hued animal bounded away with savage growls as they approached. The treasure-wagon had contained a priceless black tiger from the wilds of India, on its way East to the menagerie of some showman.

Arkansaw had suffered his imagination to delude him.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE GIRL AVENGER.

LEFT alone on the narrow ledge that was used as a means to enter the secret cavern of the outlaws, by the back way, Blue Bob took his station near where the ill-fated sentry had stood when Roaring Ralph sprung upon him. At his feet was the dark spot upon the rocks that showed where the outlaw's life-blood had flowed.

Time passed slowly on. Bob was wondering what had become of his companion and when Ralph would make his appearance. The moon was dodging in and out among the clouds, and occasionally a shadow would sweep over the face of the landscape.

A slight noise, as of a rolling stone, caught his ear. It came from the direction of the rocks behind which Ralph and himself had hidden when they first saw the sentry. Blue Bob stepped around the rock, and elevated his rifle, as that man had done before him.

Immediately a low, quaint whistle proceeded from the rocks. This he supposed was a signal, and lowering his gun, he resumed his former position. A man made his appearance, and hurried toward him.

"It's you, is it, Red Tom?" he said.

A grunt was the only answer he received.

"Whar's the captain?" asked the man, who was breathing heavily, as though he had ridden hard or walked far.

Blue Bob pointed toward the entrance to the cavern.

"We caught a Tartar with that wagon-train. They've intrenched themselves in that old Skeleton Patch, and we must have every man to clean 'em out. By the way, how about that thar speculation?"

Now, as Blue Bob was totally in the dark so far as the matter in question was concerned, he hardly knew what to say, and at last, feeling somewhat angry, he growled out:

"Go to the devil!"

Now, it happened that the real Red Tom had possessed a treble voice, as unlike Bob's hoarse tones as could be imagined. There could be none genuine without this peculiar trait. The messenger saw the cheat immediately, but suspected it was some other of the outlaws.

"What do you mean, playing this trick?" he demanded.

A knife accidentally falling from his belt just then, he stooped and picked it up. No sooner had the moonlight fallen upon the weapon than the man uttered a sharp cry. It was covered with blood!

Blue Bob saw that the game was up. Should this man be suffered to give the alarm, he

would not only be in great danger of getting into trouble himself, but, there was Roaring Ralph in the lion's den.

The scout had already leaned his rifle against the rocky wall. Before the messenger could fully comprehend his danger, Blue Bob had closed with him. Such was the suddenness of the assault that the knife fell to the ground, and his throat was clutched in a vice-like gripe before he could defend himself. As the next best thing, he wrapped his arms around his assailant.

Then began a struggle for life on the narrow ledge.

Blue Bob was tall and slim, but possessed the power of a Farnese Hercules in those sinewy arms.

With that fearful gripe upon his throat, the alarmed messenger could do almost nothing.

His own clasp gradually loosened, and as length his arms fell powerless at his side. Exerting his tremendous strength, Blue Bob raised the choked outlaw from his feet, and actually threw him over the ledge.

The man was too badly choked to utter a cry, and the only noise he made was caused by his body crashing through the branches of a tree that grew at the foot of the precipice, hundreds of feet below.

Blue Bob made haste to grasp his gun, and looked about him to see if any more of the enemy were in sight, but the cold moon's beams fell upon the rocks, the shadows drifted by, and no one made his appearance.

He was growing uneasy now. What if half a dozen of the outlaws should come upon him at once! They would detect the counterfeit perhaps easier than this messenger had done.

"Thunder! my goose would be cooked then, sure! Better to leave the place unguarded," he said to himself.

Climbing among the rocks, he secreted himself at a point where the ledge could be easily seen.

Hardly had he assumed this position, when a form appeared, stealing along the narrow ledge, and seemingly coming from the outlaws' cavern.

At first, Blue Bob thought it was his comrade in arms returning from his scout into the den. But a second glance, even in the semi-darkness, for the moon was behind a cloud, told him that he had made a mistake. The new-comer did not possess Roaring Ralph's height, but was of a delicate mold. He came stealing cautiously along the ledge, and Bob saw that he carried something in his hand that looked very like a knife. What could it all mean?

After rounding the bend of the cliff, the man seemed surprised to find no sentry in sight. The dark stain upon the rocks, and the bloody footprints beside it must have caught his eye, for as the moon came out, Blue Bob saw him down on his knees beside them.

Giving an exclamation that sounded like horror, the man sprung to his feet, and pressed a hand against his forehead. When he took it down, the moon broke out again. It revealed a white face to the startled eyes of the ranger scout.

"Blue blazes! it's the gal, as I live!" he exclaimed.

The sound of his voice must have startled the man upon the ledge, for he half drew a pistol and looked anxiously around. At this instant, however, a strange bird-call, low but distinct, pierced the air. It was immediately answered by the man upon the ledge.

Blue Bob sprung down from his place of concealment.

"Miss Hattie, you here!" he exclaimed, extending his hand.

"Why not, old friend? You know my life mission. I shall avenge the murder of my father. The time is now close at hand. Come with me. I have something to tell you," and she drew him toward the cave.

This was Roaring Ralph's rival in the cause of vengeance!

CHAPTER XIV.

A RECKLESS RANGER.

LET us now discover what Roaring Ralph has been about.

The reckless Colorado ranger plunged without an instant's hesitation into the dark-looking cavern from whence he had only recently made his escape. Being somewhat familiar with the place after having gone through it once before, he knew where the danger spots might be found, and thus managed to avoid the pitfalls and other obstructions that would have proved as snares for the unwary feet of a stranger.

This retreat of the Prairie Pests was simply one of those caverns so often found in mountainous regions, and had been wholly formed by Nature's subtle hand.

Roaring Ralph went many hundred yards into the bowels of the Rocky Mountains before the sound of loud talking, mingled with hoarse peals of laughter, warned him that he was drawing near the headquarters of the bandits.

By crawling from one rock to another, and taking advantage of every shelter that offered itself, the ranger managed to gain a point where he could see almost everything that passed in the cavern.

It was lighted by torches and lanterns, just as when he had been here before, a captive in the hands of the man whom he had sought so long, and yet whom he knew not when found, although it seemed that Daring Dick knew him well enough.

To his surprise Ralph found that there were only half a dozen men in the cavern. This indicated that the outlaw chief with his band of cutthroats, was still scouring the prairie in search of the man who had twice slipped through his fingers, never suspecting that Roaring Ralph had gone back to the lion's den.

The ranger lay quiet and watched those in the cavern. Four of them were indulging in a little game of eucher, in which the stakes seemed to be quite large. Soon two of them gave it up. The other couple fought savagely, but the luck was one-sided. Their words of dispute at length drew Ralph's attention to what they were saying.

"Make it two hundred and I'll play," said the one in bad luck.

"Agreed," returned the other, shoving out a small heap of gold.

The game was quickly ended.

"She's yours, Jack. Curses on the luck! After all my trouble, the gal slicks out of my hands," growled the loser.

"Into mine. Hoop la!" and shoving his winnings into his pocket, the victor stalked over to a corner of the cavern.

By craning his neck, Roaring Ralph discovered the figure of a girl seated upon a stool, with her face hidden in her hands.

"Come, Beauty, you're my property now," and as the man's hand touched her, the girl sprang to her feet like a flash.

"How dare you?" she exclaimed.

Ralph saw a most beautiful face, with a pair of matchless black eyes that flashed through the tears filling them. He had no time to observe more, for the brute, laughing at the attitude assumed by the captive girl, advanced as if about to kiss her. He was met by a stinging slap that made his ear tingle.

"How now, you vixen!" he cried, extending his arms.

"Back! back!" exclaimed the girl.

He saw nothing in the menace, and paid no heed to it. Roaring Ralph caught his breath as he saw what was in the girl's hand.

The next instant something flashed in the torchlight, and when, with a startled oath, the fellow jumped back as though he had unexpectedly trod upon a rattlesnake, the handle of a small toy dagger protruded from his arm, close beside his heart.

"You shall pay for your fun, my fine lady," he said, savagely, retreating to his comrades, who were laughing heartily, but who removed the blade that had pinned his arm to his side, and proceeded to dress the wound.

The girl with the black eyes had again sunk down upon the stool and was sobbing bitterly, as Ralph could hear.

"Poor little thing," muttered the tender-hearted scout, "we'll get ye out of that before a great while. 'I've a good mind to— No, that would hardly do. I'll wait a better chance.'"

"Several times had the ranger raised his gun to fire, but on each occasion he seemed to think better of it, for the rifle was lowered.

There were six men in view, even granted that no more were within hearing. Was it possible for him to make way with them all, unaided?

I have said that the ranger was usually a reckless man; indeed, he was known along the border for his dare devil qualities. When, therefore, some time later, he saw the wounded man, goaded by the taunts of his comrades, again approach the young girl, Ralph threw up his rifle with a scowl of rage.

"You will have it, I see!"

The next instant, even as the outlaw was about to rush upon the captive and touch his vile lips to hers, the clear detonation of a Western rifle rang through the great cavern. Without even a moan the scoundrel pitched forward upon the rocks, upon which his brains oozed in a sickening manner. Leaving his rifle where he had lain, Roaring Ralph sprang to meet the other outlaws.

The rapid detonation of revolvers told what deadly work was in progress. When his weapon was empty, Ralph stood bleeding from several wounds, but with only one foe opposed to him. The useless revolver was dropped, and dodging a bullet which the other sent at him, the ranger bounded toward him. There was blood in the eyes of the reckless scout, and in such a state he was worse than a hurricane.

Knives flashed in the light; another instant and the two men had closed. It was a dreadful struggle for half a moment. Then they went down, Roaring Ralph on top. The girl hid her face.

There was a deep thud as the ranger's heavy blade sunk to the hilt in the outlaw's breast. Just as the victor was about to rise to his feet, a sardonic laugh greeted him, and he became aware that fully twenty men had entered the cavern, led by Daring Dick himself.

CHAPTER XV.

GAME TO THE LAST.

RESISTANCE under such circumstances seemed folly, but there are some men who never say die as long as they draw breath. Roaring Ralph was one of these. He had no weapon but his knife; that was sheathed in the breast of his fallen foe just as the score of outlaws made their presence known, but as he leaped to his feet, the Colorado ranger pulled it from its human scabbard.

He stood at bay. It was a tableau that might have stirred the heart of almost any man. One against twenty.

The ranger's form was drawn up, every muscle at play, and the blood trickled from the red blade that was raised above his head. Here and there lay a still form upon the rocky floor, just where they had fallen when death had overtaken them.

The young girl crouched against the further wall, her eyes fastened upon the awful scene, and praying in her heart for the brave man who had risked his life to save her from insult.

It was soon broken by the leader's voice.

"At him, my hearties. Take him alive and I've a purse to divide among you. He shall not escape a second time. Away!"

With savage howls the human tigers circled around Roaring Ralph. When a man sees the work of a single arm in six corpses, he is apt to respect the prowess of that person.

The ranger kept his eyes on the enemy as well as he could, but not being able to see out of the back of his head, was unaware that one of the Pests had uncoiled a lasso that had been wound about his waist.

When the noose circled through the air and fell over his raised arm, the thrower gave it a jerk, and the gory knife was plucked out of the ranger's hand as neatly as if some one had snatched it from him.

Now that they had nothing to fear, the men could be brave enough. They rushed forward and threw themselves upon Roaring Ralph like as many wolves.

Game to the last he struck out vigorously with his fists. The first man who came within his reach, went backward on his head, having received a fearful blow in the face.

But, when was a single, unarmed man able to cope with a score of foes, any one of whom might within reason be just as strong as himself? Such a thing has not been known in these degenerate days, nor probably since the time of giants.

Sturdy arms encircled his body, and he was thrown upon the ground, nor were they at all particular about selecting a soft spot on which to deposit him.

Having thus floored the enemy, two of the outlaws actually sat down upon him, much to Ralph's disgust, until their comrades had fastened his arms and feet, so that to get away was an utter impossibility.

After thus securing him, they rolled the ranger over to a corner, with as much ceremony as if he had been a log, and then left him to his reflections, which we shall also do for a short time.

While some of the men were carrying away those who had fallen by the furious hand of the Colorado ranger, first taking all their valuables, others brought in a prisoner, whose arms were bound behind his back. It was no other than Moccasin Mat.

How this intrepid hunter fell into the clutches of the captain and his gang, after escaping from the other batch of outlaws, was very simple. He was so unfortunate as to run directly into their midst, for Daring Dick had soon realized the foolishness of attempting to pursue Roaring Ralph, and gone into camp with his followers.

The hunter had entered the *motte* of trees and halted his horse at the spring to refresh him with a drink, when he was suddenly seized by a pair of arms. So unexpected was the assault, that Mat was pulled from his horse before he could realize what was the matter, and in another instant found himself a prisoner.

The Prairie Pests had then started for the mountains, which were near at hand, and reached their cavern just as Roaring Ralph was disposing of the last of the guard.

They knew nothing of the hunter, save that he was probably an enemy, for these men only claimed those as lawless as themselves for friends. What would have eventually been done with Mat, is left for conjecture. Doubtless they would have offered him the choice between joining them and committing some fearful crime that would outlaw him forever, and death. However, it was not fated to come to that pass.

Shortly after the termination of this scene in the mountain retreat, a man hastily entered. He came by the main entrance, and perhaps it was lucky for him that he did so, seeing what the fate of the fellow who had attempted to pass Blue Bob had been.

It was a second messenger from the besieger of the wagon-train.

He had a hasty interview with the captain, during which he told the sorrowful story about the much-vaunted treasure, what it had turned out to be, and how the guide had paid for his credulity with his life.

Daring Dick was furious when he heard it all.

"Men, this is no time to rest. We must be in the saddle again. I swear that every soul in that train shall die before another night has passed. Follow me."

Leaving four men to guard the cave, the rest hastened away.

Those left behind were cunning-looking fel-

flows and not likely to give the prisoners a chance to escape. One of them, with a fierce visage, and who seemed to be much feared among the others, at length walked over to where Moccasin Mat lay.

"Mat Gordon, do you know me?" he hissed savagely.

"My God! it is Black Lenox!" exclaimed the young hunter.

"You are right. I have not forgotten our last meeting. Then, you had the upper hand. You remember my oath. Now I'm going to cut out your heart and stuff it down your throat," and the human fiend unsheathed a wicked-looking blade.

CHAPTER XVI.

FACE TO FACE WITH DEATH.

THERE are times when the bravest man may tremble without endangering his reputation. Surely Moccasin Mat might have been pardoned had he betrayed any weakness, with such a bloodthirsty threat ringing in his ears, and a fiend bending over him, who he well knew would feel no compunction of conscience in putting it into execution. But his nerve did not fail him.

"Bah! a fig for your threats. A man can die but once, and I have never been afraid. Do your worst, you devil," he said.

What wonderful pluck in the face of death! Roaring Ralph lay near at hand, and could hear every word. He and Mat were old friends, and now he recognized the young hunter.

"Brave fellow," he muttered, "what a shame if they kill my handsome hunter. Where is Blue Bob? Would to God he was here."

Blue Bob and his strange friend were even at this moment threading the long passage, and on the way to the cavern.

Black Lenox fairly blazed with anger when he heard the bound man taunt him after this fashion. All the brute in him (and this was probably the larger portion of his anatomy) was aroused.

"Curse you. 'Once you spoilt a game of mine, and took from me a gal I had sworn to marry. What did you do with her? Where is Hattie Farley now?" growled the outlaw.

"I know no more than yourself. She was carried away by her father, and I never saw her again," returned Mat.

"You lie, you dog! We killed Joe Farley six months ago, and she was not with him. You ran off with her. Look your last on this world, Moccasin Mat, for your time has come."

The shining blade was raised aloft. There was not the least doubt but what the devil would have put his fiendish threat into execution, and Blue Bob was not yet on hand. Black Lenox was kneeling beside his intended victim. Just as the quivering blade was about to be plunged into the young man's breast, something struck the outlaw square in the middle of the back. Such was the force of the blow, that he pitched headlong over the body of the young hunter, his knife escaping from his hand and flying forward.

Roaring Ralph was not the man to lay quiet and see an old comrade foully murdered before his very eyes without making some effort in his behalf. One would think that the reckless ranger, bound hand and foot, was absolutely powerless. But when he saw that the outlaw was fully determined to do what he said, Roaring Ralph rolled himself like a log over the ground that separated him from the other prisoner.

The three men had been watching all this, but as they had not interfered to save Mat's life, neither did they warn their comrade of what was coming. So the first intimation Black Lenox had of his danger, was a tremendous kick in the back from Ralph's feet that sent him over like a flash.

A venomous cry like that of an enraged wild animal, broke from his lips. Gaining his feet he ran after his knife, and then sprung at

the reckless ranger. But here his three comrades intervened.

"Do what you please with that cub, Lenox, but this man is the captain's own meat. He gave me express orders not to have him harmed, as he wants to kill the critter himself," and the speaker, aided by his two companions pulled Roaring Ralph far away.

"Curse it, I must have blood. Now, look out for yourself. This very knife it was that sunk into Joe Farley's heart —"

A cry rung through the cavern. Surely it was a woman's voice, and yet the young girl sitting in a distant corner with her face hidden in her hands, had not given utterance to it.

Black Lenox had been about to drive his knife into the young hunter, but this scream caused him to stay his hand. He turned his head. A figure dressed as a man, but with a beautiful white face, had suddenly appeared in the cavern. A rifle was aimed at the outlaw.

"I am Hattie Farley. Thus is my father's death avenged. I thought it was Daring Dick who killed him, Archer Fleming that was."

A puff of white smoke; the quick report of a rifle, and all was over. Black Lenox leaped to his feet as though upon springs; stood for an instant with his arms extended, and then fell over, a dead man. The three others had by this time recovered their senses, and with loud oaths were leaping toward the disguised girl, who as if overcome with the reaction was leaning against the wall. Another gun sounded, and Blue Bob sprung into view, a revolver in each hand, with which he covered the remaining two scoundrels.

"Throw up your hands. Quick! or by the Eternal I fire."

They hastily did as they were bidden, and acting under Blue Bob's orders, Roaring Ralph, whom Hattie had cut loose, first relieved the fellows of their weapons and afterward securely bound them.

While this was being done, Moccasin Mat called out to Bob, who soon severed his bonds.

Seeing that he had been really saved by this ranger, Mat acted very brusquely, for hardly vouchsafing him a word of thanks he hurried over to Bob's companion.

"Hattie! ah! I knew your voice. Do you remember me?"

With a start the disguised girl looked up. Her face turned scarlet. They had met before, only once, and had not even exchanged a sentence, but had loved each other at first sight. She was the girl Mat had mentioned to the major.

"Surely I remember you. You saved my life," she said confusedly, while Mat possessed himself of her little brown hand.

"And you have just returned the favor, killing my worst foe. I found out who you were at the fort, but your father carried you away. You do not even know who I am. Texas is my native State. I am called Moccasin Mat, but my real name is Mat Gordon."

A shriek rung through the cavern. The beautiful captive with the large black eyes flew to the ranger and threw her arms around his neck.

"Mat, alive and well! Oh! God, this is too much happiness."

The Texan's arms were around her and she was folded to his breast.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE CRACK OF DOOM.

RETURN we to the wagon-train.

Arkansaw's brilliant *coup d'etat* had taken the three lion-hunters by surprise. Before they could comprehend what had occurred, the treasure-wagon, with the false guide mounted on the seat, was at least a dozen yards away. Two of the dark-featured men immediately darted in pursuit, firing their guns as they ran, but of course the bullets went far astray. As to their coming up with the runaway wagon, that was an utter impossibility so long as the victorious guide lashed and shouted at the terrified horses. The lion-hunters seemed

to realize this after one of them had tripped over a human skull, and plunged into a pile of bleached bones, his comrade falling on top of him.

The singular freak of the treacherous guide had created quite a sensation in the stockade. Major Handy was perhaps the only one who really knew what the wagon contained, and he considered the guide a fool to play such a joke upon himself.

As there was now no need of keeping it a secret, the keepers told what the wagon did really contain. Major Handy had in the beginning advised them this way, and now they wished his advice had been taken, for, without some great inducement, the Prairie Pests would never have assaulted a train, where the inmates, although few in number, were fighting-men.

However, there was no use in crying over spilt milk. They took their loss philosophically, and proceeded to repair damages by shoving some extra logs into the place made vacant by the guide's scurvy trick.

The major had heard the racket further out upon the prairie, and knew that Moccasin Mat had been discovered, but the mist prevented his seeing any great distance, even when the moon was out, and he knew not whether his brave hunter friend had escaped their clutches or not. From the fact that the yells of the outlaws seemed to grow less distinct, and then give out altogether, he was inclined to take hope.

The moon soon vanished behind the clouds, reappearing at intervals. In this way the hours sped along. A constant watch was kept up, for the outlaws might repeat their attack at any time, and if the little garrison was caught napping, gain a foothold within the stockade. Should this advantage occur, the fight would be as good as over, for their breastwork was the only thing that served the travelers in place of more men.

There was an hour of darkness before dawn, and it was this that the major feared. He felt certain that the outlaws intended taking advantage of this in some way or other, and so they did, but not as he had thought.

When the moon vanished behind the distant mountains, he gave orders to pile up the wood and have a blazing fire. This illuminated the surroundings of the stockade for a dozen yards or so in every direction. The defenders could easily secrete themselves among the wagons and logs, and make the edge of this lighted circle an imaginary line that it would be death to pass.

This half-hour was destined to prove more dangerous to the anxious men behind the stockade than the rest of the night combined. Before ten minutes had passed away, guns began to crack occasionally, and bullets to fly through the rude fort.

The men were well sheltered, and safe from these random shots, but the poor horses caught it, and several went down. Major Handy noticed, after a short time had elapsed, that the shots all came from one side. To the west of the stockade, not a single gun-flash had lighted up the impenetrable darkness.

He had heard voices in this direction for some time past, accompanied by strange sounds, as if heavy bodies were being pulled over the earth. Fancying that if there was an assault at all, it would come from this quarter, he had most of his men on hand ready to defend it.

Still the minutes passed on and no attack came. For at least half an hour he had heard these queer noises. One of his men drew his attention to the East. A faint gray line could be seen along the horizon; it was the first streak of the welcome dawn.

Resolved to discover what strange thing the outlaws were at work on, the major spoke a few words to a stalwart teamster named Bruce Wallace, who owned one of the wagons. Boldly advancing to the fire, this man seized upon a burning fagot and, giving it several whirled around his head, hurled it toward the spot from whence came the strange sounds. Like a

meteor it shot through space, and landing upon the ground, blazed up.

Major Handy could not restrain an exclamation of amazement at what he saw. Four men were in sight, and two horses. The animals were fastened to a small log by a rude set of harness, and seemed to be drawing it away.

"What under the sun—" began Major Handy, but the crack of a rifle close beside him interrupted his speech.

One of the teamsters had fired. The man who was stooping over the log rolled over upon his face. A comrade jumped upon the torch that had betrayed them, and darkness fell upon the scene.

Our friends heard no more of the strange noises, nor were they further annoyed by the random shots, which had evidently been fired more for the sake of attracting their attention to that quarter, so that the mysterious logging-party could work undisturbed, than for the execution they might do.

What it all meant, not one within the train could guess. The only thing they hit upon, was that the outlaws were about to erect fortifications of their own, past which the train could never go.

Major Handy feared for worse things than this, and looked anxiously for morning to come, dreading lest it should expose some devilish agency to effect their destruction.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A DESERTED MOVING BATTERY.

DAYLIGHT came at last.

As soon as he was able to see distinctly, Major Handy scanned the surrounding prairie with anxious eyes.

In two different directions he saw small bodies of the outlaws. They were doubtless stationed in these places in order to have the train completely surrounded.

He gave these merely a casual glance, and then turned his full attention to the third party, where something unusual was evidently going on.

The wind was blowing toward our friends from this quarter, and a sound reached their ears very much like hammering. At first the major was extremely puzzled. Then, as daylight advanced with rapid strides, and his view became clearer, the truth suddenly burst upon him.

The Prairie Pests were making a moving battery out of the wagon Arkansaw had run away with. It would seem as though this infernal treasure-car was bound to be the death of them yet.

During the period of darkness that lasted between the setting of the moon and the coming dawn, they had carried away at least a dozen long, light, cottonwood logs from around the stockade. These were fastened to the wagon on all sides, and in such a manner that those within would be effectually shielded from bullets which would sink into the soft wood.

Major Handy watched the work with considerable interest. He possessed a splendid field-glass which was now in constant service. Those in the stockade wondered how the clumsy vehicle was to be propelled, but were not kept long in doubt, for the heavy boards that had been taken from the top, and through which a bullet could not pass, were fastened to the sides in such a manner, that half a dozen of the outlaws could walk behind and push the movable fort slowly forward.

One thing puzzled the major greatly. With his glass he could see that a loophole half a foot in diameter had been left in the front of the affair. He was still trying to guess what this was for, when one of the men reported a body of horsemen in view. Could it be the soldiers? The wild hope that had sprung into existence soon sunk again, for the new-comers were in the direction of the mountains. Besides this, the Prairie Pests seemed in nowise alarmed. Indeed several of them left the main body and galloped toward those approaching.

They were almost a score in number, and would more than make up for those who had

lost their lives during the night attack, so that their enemies were stronger, and more determined than ever.

An hour or so after the arrival of the newcomers, the moving fort seemed to be in readiness. Major Handy understood what the circular hole was for when he saw them transfer a mountain howitzer from the back of a mule to the log wagon.

Some six or eight men then climbed into the rude but safe affair, and were handed in all sorts of weapons, for great execution was expected of this storming party. Half a dozen others took their places behind, and the wagon began to move, amidst the shouts of the excited outlaws.

The major saw this start made with an apprehension he did not attempt to conceal. Onward came the clumsy affair, concealing a pack of savage foes equal to themselves in number, besides the cannon, with which fearful havoc could be made.

Had those who conducted this novel assault been wise, they would have come to a halt a hundred yards away from the fort, and made the howitzer come into play. A dozen shots, even if they were but indifferent marksmen, would have "made Rome howl!"

The major was an old military man, although young in years.

"Boys," said he, impressively, "if they keep their distance and pelt us, Heaven knows where we'll go to. Every man will have to leave the stockade and find shelter behind a log. Some of us had better do that now. The rest lie flat upon the ground, and give them every bullet that will tell."

Slowly the clumsy affair moved on. It was now within easy pistol-range, and yet no sign of life. Never did a victim of the Inquisition watch the gradual approach of the keen knives, that were to enter his flesh at a hundred given points, with more anxiety than did our friends gaze upon the rude affair that was drawing nearer every moment.

Fifty yards, forty, thirty, and yet no sign of life. A grim smile had now begun to play around the corners of the major's mouth, for their cause was brightening. If it came to the worst, they could assault the enemy's fort in turn.

The wagon now came to a full stop. It was evident that those within wished to do some damage, and cripple the defenders of the stockade before advancing further.

"Down! down!" cried the major.

A heavy report boomed over the prairie, and the movable fort was wrapped in dense, white smoke for half a moment. The ball tore through one of the wagons, killed a horse, and then spun over the prairie on the other side.

A cheer from the outlaws attested to their complete satisfaction with the way affairs were working.

"This will never do," said the major; "that gun must be captured. After the next discharge we must make a rush while the smoke hangs about them. Kill every man who resists."

"Hold!" cried the little doctor, "I have a better way. Bruce Wallace, can you throw this inside the wagon?" exhibiting a black ball not any larger than an orange, but heavy as iron.

Bruce took it, measured the distance with his eye, and then threw with great precision. Doctor Schillar called upon those beside him to have their rifles in readiness.

The black ball was composed of the Greek fire of the ancients, and other explosive compounds. A fearful discharge followed its disappearance within the wagon fort; a furious red flame flashed up for an instant, and then seven scorched and burning men crawled over the logs like so many acrobats.

CHAPTER XIX.

NOT A MOMENT TOO SOON.

MAJOR HANDY burst out into a laugh when

those seven figures leaped into view. To the terror-stricken wretches it was anything but a joke. Their clothes were on fire; two of them seemed like so many pillars of flame, and their shrieks, as they ran aimlessly about, were agonizing in the extreme. As to the others, with all the hair singed from their faces and heads, and their clothes smoldering, they knew not which way to turn.

Those within the stockade were grim, pitiless men. It was a struggle for the supremacy between the two parties. These fiends, without any cause whatever, were doing their best to slay every man in the train, and our friends would have no mercy on them. When, however, the awful plight of the blazing Prairie Pests became evident, the major could not help crying out.

"For God's sake, men, shoot and put them out of agony!" he shouted.

Then the rifles began to crack, and one after another the doomed wretches pitched forward upon the prairie, dead.

The doctor handed Bruce Wallace several more of his Greek fire-balls, and these were tossed by the teamster over the top of the wagon. With each fall came an explosion so sharp and resounding that it seemed to fairly make the earth tremble.

Rather than be burned to death in this horrible manner, the half-dozen outlaws who had pushed the moving battery forward, chose to risk the chances of crawling away.

Such was their great alarm, however, that the caution necessary for a movement of this kind, was in a measure neglected, and as each skulking form showed itself, several guns and pistols sounded the fellow's death-knell.

Not a man of those who had made use of the moving battery, escaped.

Out on the prairie their comrades watched the affair with wonder that quickly changed to horror when they heard the fearful reports and saw the doomed men rushing frantically about, blazing like so many signal-fires.

Twice some of the more courageous urged their steeds forward, as if about to make a daring assault upon the stockade, but after going a short distance, these doughty warriors, warned of the fact that they were within rifle range by the bullets that whistled close to their ears, turned and fled again to the safety line.

At the major's solicitation, several of the men went out to draw the wagon up to the stockade. The inside was still smoldering, but it was easily extinguished.

A horrible sight presented itself to the teamsters, for the eighth man lay inside the moving fort, sadly burned. He was dead to a certainty, for one could hardly live with the top of his head blown off. Probably the doctor's fiery explosive had struck him. Beyond the wagon several holes in the ground marked the spots where the other balls had alighted.

By this time the gallant defenders of the prairie stockade were becoming accustomed to scenes of horror. In ten minutes the wagon was in its old position, and the three lion-hunters surveyed the wreck of their mysterious cage with rueful faces.

The major found balls beside the howitzer. What powder the wretched outlaws had brought with them, had served to help them in getting out of their fort, but there was plenty in the train. A few moments later the soldier sighted the piece, and applied a red-hot iron rod which he had taken from the fire.

The discharge made the wagon tremble. Such a thick column of white smoke arose in front, that the major could see nothing for fully a moment, but the shouts of his comrades told him that his shot had accomplished some execution. In fact the ball had struck the ground just in front of the outlaws, ricocheting upward and cutting a line completely through the cluster. One or two men were slain by the shot, and as many horses.

"At this rate we shall exterminate them," declared the little doctor.

This disaster taught the outlaws a lesson, and they immediately separated into small

groups, retiring at the same time, to points further away from the stockade.

Slowly the day passed. Afternoon came and passed, and when the shades of evening began to fall, the situation was precisely the same as in the morning.

One thing was certain; the outlaws seemed very restless as night drew on apace, as if they had given up all ideas of a siege, and were determined to put everything into a grand assault during the hours of darkness.

The moon came up, and still no signs of an attack. During the day, the defenders of the little stockade had enjoyed turns at sleeping, and were all fresh for duty when darkness descended. What wounds they had received, the doctor had bandaged up, and his patients declared his touch magnetic, for all pain left them.

Large clouds sailed over the blue field, and at times everything was shrouded in semi-gloom. During one of these intervals, the outlaws to a man came forward to the assault.

There was now no drawing back. All must be decided in this fearful struggle. In spite of their losses the Prairie Pests still outnumbered the travelers two to one, and, rendered savage at being held in check and almost defeated by this handful of men, were for the time being veritable demons.

Oh! it was a fearful, fearful ten minutes.

When the moon struggled out from behind the clouds, her bright beams showed human beings engaged in mortal combat. The outlaws had desperately forced an entrance into the stockade, and now were mixed up with the brave defenders. Forms, interlocked went whirling about here and there, clasped in death's embrace. Major Handy was engaged in defending himself against three men, one of whom was Daring Dick himself, and a second, the soldier's old enemy, Arizona Dave.

He had just succeeded in giving this latter scoundrel his death-wound when above the racket arose the silvery notes of a cavalry bugle.

There was magic in the sound.

Instantly every combatant seemed turned into stone. The silence of death fell upon them.

CHAPTER XX.

CONCLUSION.

THE heavy thunder of coming hoofs told the story.

A cheer broke from the hard-pressed defenders of the stockade. Curses loud and deep arose from the defeated outlaws.

Their horses were far out upon the prairie, and there was but little chance of reaching them, for the moon seemed determined to remain in sight.

Bounding over the logs, those who were able made off on a run, but the troopers were now close at hand. Swooping down like an avalanche, the horsemen reached the stockade. Carbines began to crack, and the horsemen, separating, pursued the fugitives over the prairie.

It was almost a slaughter. Few, indeed, escaped the vengeance of the cavalymen.

A horseman overtook one of the bandits alone upon the open land, and finding himself brought to bay, the outlaw turned like a tiger. In his hand gleamed a bright blade. The hunter sprung from his horse and faced the Prairie Pest.

"We meet at last. Daring Dick, since last seeing you I've learned that you are Archer Fleming. Do you admit it?"

"Assuredly," gasped the handsome devil.

"Then your time has come. I'm going to kill you right here. That's me, Roaring Ralph Rockwood, you bet!"

The knives clashed. Steel smote upon steel. The moon vanished behind a cloud, thus giving the few outlaws who were left a chance to escape, and still these two fought on.

Daring Dick seemed to know he was doomed, and defended himself against the furious lunges of his opponent, with a courage born of de-

spair. At last there came a sullen plunge, followed by a bubbling cry of anguish.

Roaring Ralph, wounded in several places, but not seriously, was on his knees beside the dying road-agent, who lay on his back, one white hand pressed convulsively to his breast, where the crimson life-fluid oozed slowly forth.

The ranger had fulfilled his oath!

"Daring Dick, you wonder why I have pursued you so relentlessly. Two years ago you shot in cold blood a young friend of mine in St. Louis. You remember Frank Forest? He was my cousin. I found out what I could and started on your trail, but hunted in vain. He was a hunter named Blue Bob who put me on your track."

"I deserve it from him. Listen, Ralph Rockwood; with my dying breath I shall tell you a secret that no one else knows. Bend your head closer. Years ago, Frank Forest scorned my love. You look surprised. Lower still; my breath is going. I am a woman!"

A faint sigh, and the ill-spent life had fled.

"My God!" cried Roaring Ralph, "murderess ten times over though she was, my knife has slain her. Never before have I harmed a woman. But, I am not to blame. Poor thing, I see it all. Her love was spurned by proud Frank, and she must have become half crazed. I'll get Blue Bob to help me bury her, and none of the rest shall ever know the truth."

The two rangers performed the burial secretly. Roaring Ralph subsequently found out who the daring woman was, but her secret lay with her in the grave that marked Daring Dick's resting-place.

Our friends had met the soldiers when half a day's journey from the mountains. They were headed by a captain, and on the way to meet and welcome the new commandant of the fort. This will explain their opportune presence.

Major Handy was talking with the captain, when two forms came in view. They were Moccasin Mat and the black-eyed captive of the robber stronghold. She seemed to be looking for some one, while Mat was talking very earnestly, and several times stooped to kiss her.

The major reeled as though about to fall.

"My God! the major's shot!" cried the captain, in consternation.

A scream rung through the stockade, and the beautiful girl beside the young hunter sprang toward the soldier, her face lighted by love.

"Back! back! do not touch me, Grace! Your lover stands there. Is it thus you prove? Fair and false. Oh! my God!" cried the major.

She stood transfixed. Moccasin Mat bounded forward.

"Dare to insult my sister—" he began, furiously.

"Sister?" burst from the soldier's lips like a bombshell.

The handsome young hunter was thrust aside as one would brush away a fly, and in another moment the gallant major clasped Grace Gordon, his betrothed, to his heart, and with his arms around her, all was forgotten and forgiven.

"She is your sister," said a soft voice beside Mat; "I thought—I thought—"

"What?" asked he, tenderly, possessing himself of Hattie's hand.

"That she was your wife," she said, blushing.

"There is only one who can fill that dear place," and right then and there, with such strange surroundings, Mat Gordon drew her gently toward him, and kissed the quivering lips.

In a way that was simply marvelous, the brother and sister had been led to believe the other dead, years ago. Explanations had since cleared up the mystery, but Hattie had kept aloof after seeing the loving meeting, and followed them at a distance, as they rode toward the fort. All was now explained, however.

There is little more to add. They left the prairie stockade, and for years hunters were wont to tell yarns of the log fort with the

bleached bones surrounding it. The major was married at the fort, as was also Moccasin Mat. As to the latter, he owns an extensive farm in Texas, devoting his time to stock-raising.

With the death of Daring Dick, the Prairie Pests were no more, and the border rejoiced. Those in the train separated at the fort and were seen no more. The three lion-hunters rigged up their wagon anew, and, engaging Roaring Ralph and Blue Bob, now great friends, went out to trap the escaped tiger. It took them quite a while, but in the end they were successful.

Only a short time back, I heard a cheery voice in my *sanctum*, exclaiming:

"That's me, Roaring Ralph Rockwood, you bet!"

THE END.

Three-Fingered Jack,

The Road-Agent of the Rockies;

OR,

THE BOY MINER OF HARD LUCK.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.

CHAPTER I.

A ROAD-AGENT IN SPITE OF HIMSELF.

"HALT, there! Move a finger and I'll fill you so full of holes that your carcass won't hold water!"

The words rung out clear and distinct upon the morning air, rendered doubly significant by the sharp, metallic *click-click*, telling of one or more firearms being prepared for instant use.

The traveler promptly obeyed, in so far that he halted abruptly, the clear, mellow whistle with which he was beguiling his way ceasing as suddenly, while his eyes turned instinctively toward the dense clump of bushes from whence had issued the startling mandate. And, though his bronzed cheek grew a thought paler, his right hand quickly closed upon the revolver butt at his hip.

"None of that—keep your hands free, or there'll be a feast for the black vultures right where you stand now!" sharply added the same voice. "Thank your patron saint that we are feeling in a comfortable humor to-day, else a brace of bullets would have ordered your halt, instead of my sweet voice. You see—we are five to one—and that one a baby."

"Baby or not—give me half a show and I'll fight the lot—but no! you skulk behind cover and shoot down honest men from behind—"

"Don't they grow men bigger than that, where you came from?" and, grinning with the grace of a snarling coyote, the speaker emerged from his covert.

There was a strong contrast between the two, thus confronting each other.

The traveler was a trifle below the medium height of man, and seemed rather "chunky" in build, though that was in part the effect of his heavy, ill-fitting miner's suit of woolen and corduroy. In the chaste language of the P. R., he was one who would "peel well." His face, though bronzed by sun and wind, was tinged with pink and white. This, added to the soft fuzzy down—not unlike that upon a peach—shading his upper lip and along his jaws, gave him a schoolboyish air, not calculated to inspire awe in the breast of a rough "forty-niner," or a knight of the road such as now confronted the lad. But there was an expression around the clear-cut, red lips, a steady glitter in the full blue eye that indicated more than appeared upon the surface.

The laughing outlaw was tall, rising six feet, of a gaunt, bony and angular build, yet apparently active and supple as a mountain lion. A livid scar transversed his face, which had cut into and distorted the vision of one eye. A straggling, wiry black beard and mustache, long locks of greasy hair, a torn and blood-stained suit of Mexican garments, a belt fairly bristling with knives and revolvers, a straight-bladed, two-edged sword hanging naked at his hip, a long "Kentuck rifle" in his hand—such was the "outfit" of the road-agent.

"What do you want with me, anyhow?" sharply demanded the youth, his eyes glowing

at the taunt. "If you are a thief, you've struck a blind lead here. I'm 'shoal on the bar'—haven't got dust enough to buy a square meal—"

"We're after bigger game, baby—but you'll do to help pass away the time while waiting. As for gold—I've slit many a man's weasand for love—just to see the red blood gurgle and flow—I love it! It's mother's milk to me—dearer than all the red gold—"

His wolfish face became inflamed, his little eyes glowed and snapped, and one hand clutched nervously at his throat. The young man started, with a little cry.

"Three-Fingered Jack!"

"Ay! Manuel Garcia, or Three-Fingered Jack, as they call me," said the outlaw, proudly, holding up his mutilated hand. "You have heard of me!"

"I have—and I would give a year of my life to stand face to face with you, equally armed and with none of your cowardly coyotes around to aid you!" cried the miner, with intense bitterness, as he sprang back a pace and half drew a revolver.

But his desperate resolve was promptly frustrated. A pair of sinewy arms were wound around him from behind, and a chuckling outlaw held him helpless, clear of the ground, despite his furious struggles. Then Garcia, laughing ferociously, drew a knife and signed for his comrade to loosen his hold.

"Is it worth while, Jack?" interrupted a third outlaw. "He is not worth the plucking, and there is no honor to be gained by a man's killing a baby in knife-play."

"You are right, Cardoza—and I was a fool for minding his kicks. Bring him under cover, Jim; we will settle what to do with him there."

The captive was borne into the bushes, and there deposited in the center of the ring formed by the five outlaws. If not resigned to his fate, he realized the utter folly of attempting resistance, and quietly submitted. Yet there was no trace of fear to be read in his clear eye, nor upon his boyish face, though the conversation of the quintette was any thing but comforting.

"It's been two days since I had a fresh drink," muttered Three-Fingered Jack, playing thoughtfully with his knife.

"And my bullet-pouch is clean wored out," chimed in Mountain Jim, the renegade Kentuckian. "His hide looks kinder tender, and—think it'll answer, boys?"

"Bah! he laughs at you—see!" interrupted the fourth, a little smoke-dried scoundrel, whose full title would fill a column, but who was known to "the family" as "The Scorchers" from an incident well known in Sonora. "We must put our heads together and devise something extra for this mighty—"

"Drop it all," peremptorily cried Three-Fingers. "We'll have our sport and turn it to profit, as well. As for you, young sir—listen to me."

The mutilated outlaw changed his position to one more easy, and while his keen eyes were peering at the young miner through his shaggy eyebrows, he lazily sliced the earth and moss with his knife.

"I don't know why I don't slit your throat and be done with it—that's more in my line, and mayhap I'll do it yet—I make no promises, unless you choose to take the one chance which I'm going to offer you. I suppose you're what is called *honest*?"

"Suppose what you please—but understand one thing. You learn nothing from me until I see what you are driving at. Play with your cards on the table, and maybe I'll take a hand in."

"Knock the impudent cur in the head!" growled Mountain Jim.

"What's your name?" continued Garcia, without noticing the ruffian.

"Little Volcano," shortly replied the prisoner.

"Good enough! Now listen. You have heard of us; you know what we are. Naturally enough we don't like those whom the world calls honest men—they are fools and cowards, every one. They either don't know enough to be road-agents, or else they are afraid of the consequences. You don't seem to be either. You would be an honor to our family—when you grow a little older—"

"Thank you for nothing!" sneered the young miner. "If you hadn't taken such care to tie my hands, I'd give you an answer that you couldn't mistake."

With remarkable forbearance for him, Garcia laughed quietly. He had decided upon his course and was not to be driven from it.

"Don't borrow trouble—we don't pick up recruits for our noble army so carelessly. You couldn't join us if you begged till all was blue,

for you're an American and our master hates them as the devil does holy water. Lucky you fell into my hands instead of his!"

"Yes—report says you are a model of humanity!" and the blue eyes glowed with angry hatred as he recalled the horrible tales told of this blood-stained devil in human shape.

"Let that pass. This is what I mean: I'll give you one chance for life. If you refuse it, say your prayers beforehand. You won't have time after. You understand?"

"Clear as mud! I may understand better when you tell me the rest," coldly replied Little Volcano.

"I said you'd make a good road-agent, with practice. If you make me lie, so much the worse for you. You see yonder trail? It leads to the town of Hard Luck. There are not many travelers along it, except by stage. So much the better for you, since you must stop and go through the first passenger who chances along, or else have your throat slit as you lie."

The four outlaws who had been listening rather impatiently to the somewhat prosy explanation of their comrade, here expressed their delight at the novel entertainment promised them.

"It'll be better'n a dog-fight, won't it?" chuckled Mountain Jim, nudging Cardoza with his elbow.

"Yes—if the pilgrim only shows fight," added that worthy.

"Well, which is it?" demanded Three-Fingered Jack, as he turned toward the prisoner. "The knife or—?"

"Let me think—there's no one in sight yet," muttered Little Volcano, in a low, strained voice.

"You know the consequences. I don't care, myself, how you decide," carelessly added Garcia, as he rolled over, and producing a deck of well-worn cards from his bootleg, the party were soon deeply interested in the beauties of *monte*.

Little Volcano—as he had given his name—watched them moodily enough. It was, to say the least, a disagreeable predicament into which he had fallen. Joaquin Murieta and his gang of cutthroats and footpads were then a power in the land, carrying matters with a high hand, writing their names in letters of blood throughout the Golden State, here to-day, there to-morrow. And of them all, not even Joaquin himself was feared and execrated more than Three-Fingered Jack—the fiend in human guise, who killed for the mere pleasure of slaying—whose victims—among them helpless women and children—could be numbered by the score.

All this the prisoner knew; he knew, too, that Garcia would not hesitate to put his threat into execution at the slightest provocation.

"Say, old man," he called out, sharply. "Supposing there's more than one pilgrim—"

"So much the worse for you. One or twenty, you must halt and go through the next party that comes along yonder trail. If you do it, then you are free to go your way—if not—you understand?"

Little Volcano sunk back and relapsed into moody silence. There was one chance. The trail to Hard Luck was not one noted for its travel. The patience of the outlaws might be exhausted before any "pilgrim" came along.

This hope was crushed almost as soon as conceived. Three-Fingered Jack suddenly dropped his cards and bent his ear attentively, a grim smile curling his heavy lip. Faint and sounding from afar, the listeners could just distinguish a whistle—as though some wayfayer was beguiling his step with a merry tune.

"Your chance is coming, young hill-on-fire," grinned Garcia, turning to Little Volcano.

"Will you take it?"

"You know I must," was the sullen reply.

"Set me free and give me my weapons."

"So you can use them on us, eh? Well, we'll run the risk. Mind—the first crooked step you take will be your last. You've got to go through that mocking-bird, or we'll put lead enough in your carcass to anchor you in forty fathoms—mind that!"

"If you're afraid, you can hide yourself first, then throw me my tools," sneered the young miner. "Five men afraid of one little boy—and he unarmed and with his hands tied!"

"Crow as loudly in his ear and you'll scare him to death," laughed Garcia, as he released the captive and restored his weapons. "When he gets to yonder rock, show yourself and go through him. If he cuts up rusty, give him a pill. If he is fool enough to make a fuss and rub you out, we'll take care to avenge you—"

"Much good that'll do me! Thank you, for nothing, Three-Fingered Jack. Only—I wish it was you coming along the trail!"

"Thar he comes—only one feller!" muttered

Mountain Jim, in a tone of disgust. "An old cripple, too!"

The pilgrim, still whistling merrily, appeared upon the ridge, and Little Volcano cast an anxious glance toward the one whom he was sentenced to rob or lose his own life.

He was tall—would have been remarkably so only for a stoop which amounted to almost deformity. His hair and long beard were of a dingy yellowish white. His clothes would have put any respectable scarecrow to the blush, so dilapidated were they, patched and pieced though they had been with odds and ends until scarce a trace of the original material remained. One shoulder supported an old rusty rifle, with bandaged stock, from the barrel of which dangled a bundle tied up in a piece of sacking.

"When he reaches the rock—out you go!" hissed Three-Fingered Jack, holding a cocked revolver where Little Volcano could see it. "And mind—no tricks. The first sign of treachery and you're a dead man!"

"You said that before—do you think I'm a fool?" angrily muttered the boy miner, as he looked to his weapons.

The old man reached the rock indicated.

"Halt there! lift a finger and you're a dead man!"

Little Volcano leaped forward with leveled revolver, uttering this challenge in a clear, sharp voice. The old man paused abruptly, his tall form straightening itself, but then a puzzled look came over his face, as he saw his antagonist.

"Not a word—shell out your dust or you're a dead man!" added Little Volcano, still advancing; then, when almost within arm's length of the traveler, he muttered: "*We're watched by a gang of Joaquin's men—play frightened, or we're gone up!*"

"Don't—don't p'int that thing this-a-way—s'posin' it'd go off—whar'd I be? Don't shoot—I'll give you all I've got—"

"Hurry up, then—my arm's getting tired—shell out, or I'll blow you to never-come-back—again in less'n no time?" cried Little Volcano, for the benefit of the listening outlaws; adding in a whisper: "*Edge toward the bank—do it natural as you can—once there we'll give them the slip yet.*"

"I will—I will—the dust is in my bundle—don't shoot and I'll git it for you, mister," quavered the miner, as he swung his long rifle around from his shoulder.

The bundle fell from the barrel with such force that it rolled over and over until it paused within half a dozen feet of the steep slope. But so natural was it done that even Little Volcano believed it the result of an accident.

"It's in thar—my precious gold!" whimpered the old man, as he hobbled toward the bundle, closely followed by the boy miner, whose revolver was at his head all the time.

"Shell it out, then—quick! Now jump down the hill and hunt your cover!"

As though impelled by the same spring, the two sprang over the bank into the hollow, a rifle-bullet passing over their heads.

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